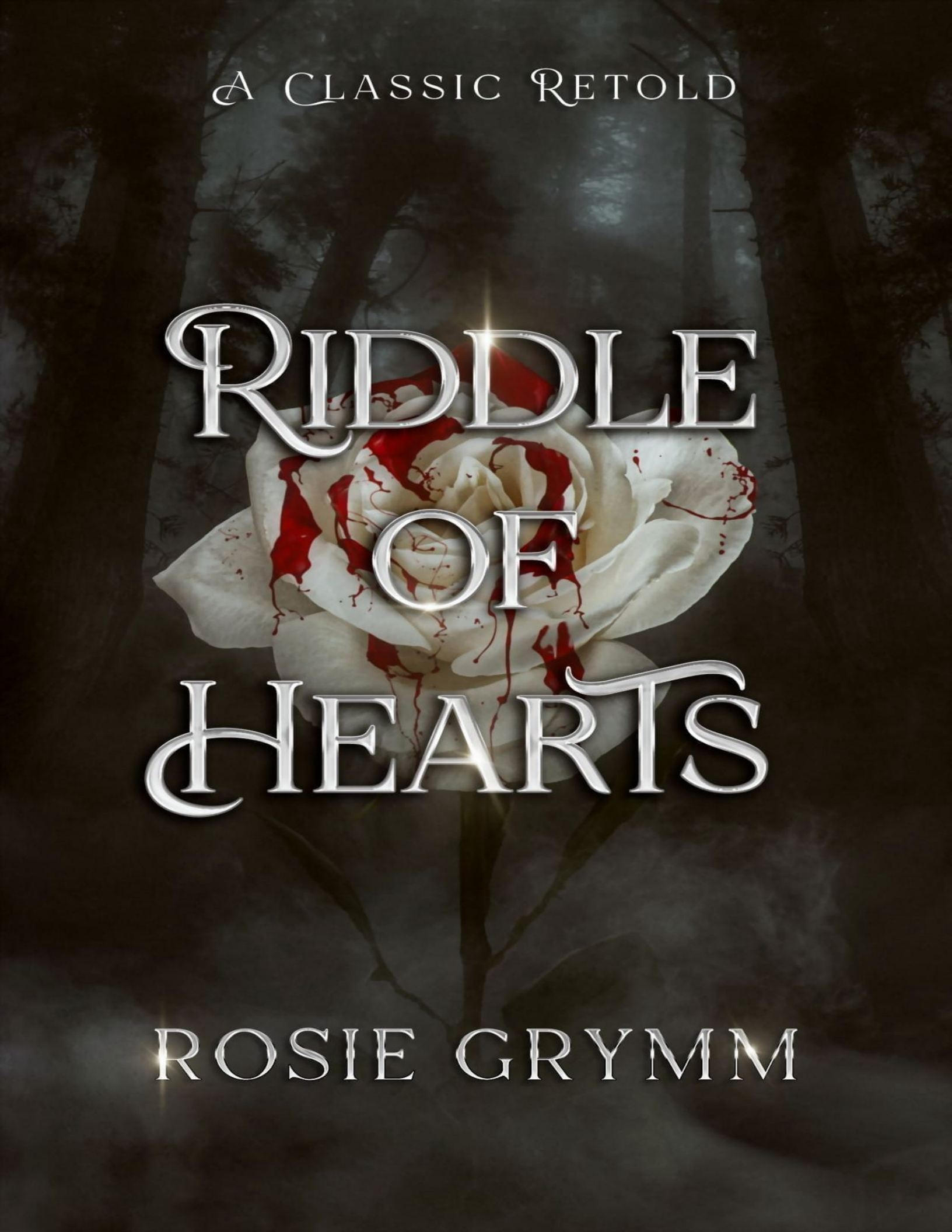
A Classic Retold



Riddle of Hearts

Rosie Grymm

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By Rosie Grymm

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To my family, the most important <3

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PROLOGUE

THE SECOND BARGAIN

The heart was warm in her hands. Pale yellow light glinted off its glass edges from somewhere over her shoulder, but she couldn't take her eyes from the gentle curves and intricate shape of the heart. In the center she imagined she could glimpse the very essence of what made a person who they were.

You cannot break this bargain. *A much sharper edge filled his voice; it crawled underneath her skin with a deadly intent.*

I don't plan on breaking it. *Her fingers were tingling with heat.* ***But this wasn't what we agreed.***

She felt her growing desperation like a distant thing; the sound of wind in the trees or a dog howling somewhere in the night. The slow steady rumble of thunder approaching; this was not how it was meant to go.

The yellow light shifted with his movement, the shape of his boot appearing in the corner of her vision, yet she was unable to look away from the glass heart. How long would that small glimmer last without its owner?

How long would the owner last without their heart?

This is what you offered.

Anger rose on the heels of her panic; he had tricked her. She had taken great care to word the bargain, to make sure she would get the three tears. One to take the heart, and the last two to make sure she and her sisters weren't caught in their escape. But everything had gotten out of hand. What did she overlook that gave him the right to the king's heart?

She was running out of time. The shadows were creeping in around them and it was only a matter of moments before she was discovered. But still she stared down at the heart, the tiny little rose that bloomed at its center.

You know how this works, *he said, gloved hand moved to cover the heart and the yellow light swung wildly before her, forcing her to blink several times at its sharpness.* ***Return the tears if you wish to undo the bargain.***

But she couldn't return them and he knew it. Because she'd already used one wish and had no way of refilling the vial without his help. Without a third bargain. Her mind spun like a storm. There was nothing to offer instead and his fingers closed over the glass possessively.

She had often been told she was too clever for her own good. If she let him have the heart, he would control the king—he would control Wonderland. She needed one more clever idea to prevent that and hope it didn't backfire like this second bargain had.

Here is your heart then. *She clutched the heart from his grasp and, before he could react, smashed the glass against his chest.*

1

DAY DREAMING

Alice woke with a rush of fresh summer air and the scent of forest flowers. The dream clung like spiderwebs to her waking mind for a split second before consciousness snapped the tether of sleep. Her limbs took longer to catch up and for what felt like an age she remained motionless in bed, focused on breathing deeply against the vague sense of helplessness not entirely caused by her momentary paralysis.

It's just a dream… Her mind floated above her body and sent the thought down like it had not really come from her. A moment later her body was free and she shoved herself upright, flinging the tangle of blankets off with enough force to send them tumbling to the floor at the end of the bed. Everything fell away; the fear that crawled hotly beneath her skin, making her heart pound, and the unbearable urge to run from the room and search for *something.* The dream slipped from her thoughts like water over glass and she was left with only a tired yawn and a headache at the base of her skull.

“Bother,” she groaned, rubbing a hand down her face. “I must have slept funny again.”

Sunlight glowed around the edges of the window curtains, the pale blue light of dawn, and beyond she could hear the servants moving about the house—sealing the moon lanterns and preparing morning meals for the plethora of nobles about to wake.

Alice climbed out of bed, bypassing her slippers in favor of walking barefoot across the cool wooden floorboards, to the desk tucked against the

wall opposite the bed. Papers scattered the surface, with three nearly empty ink pots and a nest of quills alongside a burnt-out moon lantern. She rummaged through the mess, knocking over a cup of wax pellets, till her hands landed on the familiar smooth cover of her journal.

“Dreams are meant to be strange,” she said aloud, flipping through the pages of sketches of the royal rose garden and notes on the latest disastrous court assembly, and stopped on a blank page. “They are not meant to make sense.”

What worried her most was that the dream did make sense, in the way dreams can when they are pretending to be a memory. Only it was never anything she remembered, just a familiar feeling she wasn’t sure was nostalgia of fear. Other dreams were tucked between the pages, but she avoided reading them again because they all turned out to be the same—with a few small details different here and there. That was what woke her with a jolt each morning and she preferred to write them down and forget instead. Only this time the dream had been markedly strange; the white flowers were there and mingled their summer scent with molasses, but a presence had stood behind her—a someone. There had never been anyone else in her dreams before.

“Up early again?” the voice made her jump and she scanned the small space twice before her gaze caught on the subtle blue glow of Kasei’s eyes in the shadows above her bed. She frowned and snapped shut the memorandum.

“It’s rude to sneak into a person’s room without permission,” she answered.

“I did knock.” The rest of his feline body materialized; black fur stripped with white all the way down his tail.

“I doubt it,” she muttered. “What do you want?”

Kasei floated from his spot above the bed to perch on the very edge of the mattress. He seldom bothered to move like a normal cat, preferring to hover about or simply disappear and reappear and she often wondered why nobody else seemed to comment on the strangeness. Or really notice him at all for that matter. It seemed she was the sole focus of his meddlesome inclinations.

“You had the dream again, didn’t you?” he asked, ignoring her question in favor of his own. Another thing he was fond of doing.

“Why would you think that?”

“I can see it on your pillow still, and in your hair.”

Alice laughed; the dream already felt days ago. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

She pulled the ribbon from the end of her hair, which was already coming loose, and combed out the blonde braid with her fingers. A shiver ran through her whole body and she quickly tossed aside the blue ribbon instead of redoing her hair, stomping over to search the dresser for something to wear.

“What are you doing here anyways?” she tried again with more nonchalance in her tone, pretending not to care one way or the other if he answered. It worked sometimes to get a proper response from him.

“The queen sent me.”

“What?!” she spun around, all pretend indifference vanished. “Why didn’t you say?”

“I just did,” he purred, examining the pile of her blankets on the floor with mild interest. “She requires your attendance in the main gallery.”

A summons meant something bad had happened, but lately it was hard to guess what. No one in court could guess what would set the queen off; it was a hot topic among the gossiping ladies, and some days Alice imagined even the queen didn’t know why she was so mad. But there was nothing that annoyed her more than lateness.

“Bother you, Kasei!” She huffed, flinging her journal at him. It passed through his body and flopped open onto the pillow; she threw a glare at him for good measure. His grin stretched wide across his face, showing sharp teeth as he disappeared; slit blue eyes the last to go and she was certain she could hear his laughter even after he was gone.

The sun cast friendly yellow light up the dark paneled hallway as she charged through the maze of corridors and stairwells that made up the Royal Hunting Lodge. She struggled to lace the front of the corset she’d slipped on over a green woolen dress—an attempt to make it less plain looking. Small red roses were hand painted onto the white fabric that matched her red heels. Nothing particularly special, but hopefully interesting enough not to earn her snobbish disapproval from the queen and other nobles.

“Miss Bishop…” The queen’s right-hand assistant startled at her fast approach around the turn of a corner.

“I know, I know!” Alice staggered to a halt in front of the main gallery’s double doors and rested a hand on the wall to recover her breath. She’d

gotten turned around and running up and down several flights of stairs thinned her intake of air. Sweat made her hair sticky despite the cool autumn morning.

“Have they begun already?” she asked, tucking her hair behind her ears. The curls fell loose past her shoulders, no time to tame it.

“Oh my…not yet, but you’re…” The girl fidgeted with her gloves and her pale pink eyes darted from the door to Alice and then several other places around the hall as well. Every time Alice met her, she was surprised at how nervous the girl was—a rabbit constantly watchful—though living with the Queen of Hearts was bound to cause anyone to develop anxiety.

“Not late then,” Alice smiled in relief.

“No, but—”

The doors swung open before she finished speaking. Alice stared down the length of the Gallery; it was much smaller than the throne room at Heart Palace and with more rustic decoration of antlers and bear rugs. And two rows of nobles on each side of the center carpet all staring at her. Though not rustic, they were just as disconcerting as the glassy eyes of stuffed game.

“You’re not on time…” the other girl’s whisper was too loud in the silent room. Of all the ridiculous things to do, calling an assembly at the crack of dawn was absolutely bonkers. How early had the nobles needed to wake in order to be presentable? With their brightly colored dresses and suits, frilled hats, and gloves and shoes. She felt woefully underdressed even with her lace trimmed jacket, but there was nothing to be done about it.

I am going to strangle that cat when I see him next. Alice straightened her spine and forced her hands to rest at her side, instead of crossed protectively in front of her stomach, and marched into the hall.

No one spoke as she neared the end of her walk of shame, but she could feel their looks like pins stabbing into her and could almost hear the thoughts passing between knowing glances. There was only one person she really had to worry about, gossipy old biddies were easily ignored; the Queen of Hearts was another matter.

“Late, Alice,” Queen Delaney lounged upon an ornately carved wooden chair, set on a dais so she was able to look down on the gathered court. A feat she was not able to accomplish while standing. Raven black hair

framed her pale, beautiful face which was twisted into a peeved expression. Her words were not a question.

“Just on time your highness,” Alice added a curtsey to her answer, relieved the queen hadn’t shouted. She didn’t wait to be told to take her place and immediately settled into the chair off to one side of the dais. A notepad, ink bottle, and quill nestled in their spot on the little desk before her.

“I require my scribe to be early,” the queen grumbled. “Make sure of it next time.”

“Yes, your Highness,” the answer slipped off her tongue without any real thought behind it and she busied herself—shuffling the papers a few times to avoid glancing up too soon and letting the queen see the annoyance in her eyes. Had she always been so insufferable? Instead, Alice looked to where the queen’s assistant had come to stand opposite her, on the other side of the dais.

“You may begin, Marigold,” Queen Delaney waved a hand that glittered with several gold rings. Marigold bowed and withdrew a scroll from the coat of her white jacket. Unlike the other people of court, the girl wore entirely white whenever Alice saw her; trousers to vest to jacket and shoes, even her hair was pulled into two neat white braids over each shoulder. The only spot of color, if it even could count as that, was the dull brown of her undershirt which nearly blended with her skin.

“By decree of Queen Delaney of Hearts, on the twelfth day of the mid-autumn winds, we begin the impromptu trial of…” she paused there and glanced closer at her scroll, a little crease forming between her white eyebrows.

There must be a reason. Alice mused. *She’s far too young for white hair, not much older than me.*

Someone yawned a little too obviously.

“Um… Maeve, the gardener of the club family…um was found in possession of red paint used to color the queen’s roses.”

A rustle went up through the crowd and a divide created itself around the Club family members in attendance. Alice scratched everything down; she made a note to check the gardens afterwards and see the flowers for herself. Curiosity drummed in her fingers to go see the roses. What could possibly possess someone to paint roses? It would never be said she had the

best memory, but she circled her not as if the extra ink would keep the thought on her mind for later.

“Bring them in,” the queen commanded. Alice glanced up, missing whatever Marigold had just said.

Two guards entered the Gallery, escorting between them a short woman dressed in the Club family livery; black dress with a white apron, head scarf, and leggings. She didn’t look very sorry for what she’d done and only curtsied after a few seconds of staring defiantly at the queen. No one ever won that battle; the queen’s eyes were dark like a forest at night and, with her temper, just as dangerous.

The woods that surrounded the Hunting Lodge were like that—bright and lively during the day but shadowed and threatening when night fell. Alice turned to peer out a window one of the servants must have opened; the morning breeze fluttered through the room and lifted her loose hair, tickling her neck. It smelled like the promise of changing seasons, like her dream had. A subtle dread curled in her stomach and she absently pressed her hands over her skirt, smoothing wrinkles from the fabric that weren’t there. What had bothered her about the dream this morning? She hadn’t written it down before Kasei interrupted, which left little hope of her remembering anything. Perhaps it was the color of the flowers; soft white petals with peering faces. Similar to the flowers on her corset.

“Curious…” she muttered. They had been red when she left her room, but looking down at her hands revealed her nervous rubbing had smudged the color off, which shouldn’t have been possible, but now the roses were white and the paint on her hands made her heart skip a beat. *Painting the roses red.*

“Do you have something you’d care to add?” the queen’s voice cut through the thoughts meandering around Alice’s head and she jumped, knocking the desk with her knee, and upsetting the inkpot.

“What? Oh, no, my apologies,” she snatched up a cloth from the desk drawer and quickly blotted the spilled black liquid before it could mar the court transcript. Lopsided doodles of leafy vines climbed up the sides of the paper.

“Then why are you talking?” Anger heated the edges of the queen’s tone and a spark of apprehension made Alice tense and nearly spilled the ink again.

“Now, now my dear, you know Alice suffers from Thinking Too Much.” It was the king who spoke. She gawked up at the dais because of course he was there, seated right next to the queen as was proper; dressed neat and subdued compared to the gauzy lace waterfall of his wife’s dress.

She shouldn’t have been surprised about forgetting he was there—most everyone forgot about the King of Hearts. But she was impressed he’d chosen to speak, and interrupt the queen at that.

“Shut up!” Queen Delaney snapped, but changed her focus back to the trial. The king smiled pleasantly and folded his hands in his lap. Alice frowned at him, unable to put a finger on what about him always made her feel nervous, like he was going to ask her a question she didn’t know the answer to but should. His manner was rather weak and though, by all accounts, he was quite handsome with rich brown curls and a nice symmetricalness to his features, he was stupid which detracted from his attractiveness more than she would admit to anyone. Especially the queen who barely let him out of her sight.

Thinking too much is certainly a habit you should try. She thought.

He tipped his head in her directions, bright blue eyes meeting hers, and she quickly looked away. Back to the knave and trial she was meant to be recording. A yawn worked its way up her throat and her eyes watered from trying not to be obnoxious.

“Let the witness come forward,” Marigold nodded to a guard at the double doors. Alice had missed the full report and the knave defense. Most days she could remain relatively focused, but the morning after a dream left her more scatterbrained.

A man was admitted to the Gallery who looked as though he’d been dragged through a clothier, then a haberdashery shop, and then the forest. He even smelled like the outdoors and more than one noble woman leaned back, handkerchief pressed over their nose.

Kasei’s grin slowly materialized above the man’s head, a quick blink of blue eyes and the cat was gone again.

Oh. Alice searched the Gallery as Marigold began to question the witness. The whole trial suddenly felt pointless. She needed to leave and get back to her room; there was something in her journal that was important though she wasn’t sure what. Just that Kasei’s smile and the man’s funny jacket had reminded her of something.

“Tell us what you saw in the garden, please sir.”

“Flowers, obviously,” he sounded like he was holding back a chuckle, but Alice was too focused scouring the area where Kasei had disappeared and didn’t bother writing down his statement. Perhaps he could help get her out of the Gallery; she just couldn’t keep her mind from wandering and needed to write it down. Marigold stumbled over a sentence or two in response before settling on asking if the man had seen Maeve in the gardens.

The flicker of a striped black tail toppled the rather pointed hat of a Diamond noble; the man fumbled to catch it before it hit the ground and he shrank back at the glare sent his way by the queen, who had gone strangely silent.

What are you doing? Alice pushed her thoughts with all her might at the sly feline smile that took shape above the queen’s head.

“So, you didn’t see her?” Marigold shifted her weight from foot to foot, unconsciously wrinkling the edges of her scroll. Her gaze darted to Alice then back to the witness just as quickly.

“See who?” the man asked. A part of Alice registered that the witness was an idiot, but Kasei’s eyes glowed with trouble and peered down at the gold glittering crown on the queen’s head.

“Stop answering all her questions with more questions you imbecile!” Queen Delaney shouted and jerked forward to glare more directly at the disheveled man. Kasei wobbled forward with the motion, perched atop her crown.

“What are you laughing at?!” Red flushed her cheeks and the atmosphere buzzed with apprehension. Alice was momentarily distracted, staring at the strange man as he laughed uncontrollably at the queen. He could see Kasei. No one else had ever acknowledged the feline’s existence so she had assumed he was invisible to others. Why could this man see him?

She peered closer at him but saw none of the characteristics of the Wandering Folk in his pale skin and oddly dyed hair. Yet he had no suite family mark on his face either. She didn’t doubt the weird nomads would be able to see invisible cats.

“GET OUT!” The window glass shivered from the queen’s shriek and Kasai bobbed like a cattail in the wind. His paws clutched the diamond points of the crown and he made a funny face—eyes crossed and tongue sticking out. The man laughed harder and Alice felt a bubble of amusement

rise in her own belly. She bit the inside of her cheek to fight the smile working its way to her face.

Kasei, stop it. She didn't really know if the cat could read her thoughts, it often felt as if he could. *This is not the kind of help I meant.*

"GUARDS!" Heart soldiers rushed in at the summons and immediately grabbed the witness who was practically on the ground. He was unceremoniously dragged from the hall, laughter echoing like the sound of birds in spring. Alice's eyes watered from trying not to let his laughter affect her in a way the queen would take notice. A few of the nobles made a discreet getaway before the doors could shut and Alice didn't blame them. The queen's beautiful face was rigid with fury. Her gaze swept the gallery hall like a wave of burning summer heat, breath ragged, and Alice imagined she could see a haze of red swirling around the hem of her skirts. The queen pointed a finger at the Knave who looked much more worried than she had at the beginning of the trial.

"OFF WITH HER HEAD!"

Voices rose, clamoring to be heard, and Alice didn't bother trying to keep record of who said what. She stashed the inkpot and quill before they could cause a mess and shuffled the sparse transcript into the desk drawer. More guards pushed their way into the hall, staring back and forth between the two monarchs as the queen shouted and the king attempted to calm her with very little success. The court had descended into madness once again, but at least Kasei had made an exit. Not that he wasn't just going to find somewhere else to stir up trouble. Perhaps he was secretly one of the Wandering Folk; he certainly shared some of their tendencies.

She skirted the throng of nobles and slipped out a servant's door; all the chaos turned to a muffled hum when it clicked shut behind her. But the apprehension inside her remained the same volume.

"If you ask me," she said to no one in particular, because no one else was in the narrow passage. "It's less sane by the day."

"It's the Madness."

Alice yelped and spun around at the sound of Marigold's voice right behind her, smacking her shoulder against the wall.

"Tea and biscuits! Don't sneak up on people; you're almost as bad as Kasei."

The other girl smiled apologetically, if somewhat puzzled, managing still to make it look nervous, and pulled out a small golden pocket watch.

She didn’t check the time, merely popped the cover, and shut it again several times.

Click-click, click-click.

“You’ve started to notice though, haven’t you?” Marigold had the bad habit of rushing her words and Alice frowned.

“Noticed what…?” she’d been thinking about something important, but it had been startled out of her—the scent of outdoors, earthy and floral, nagging at her memory. The sound of the witness’s laughter. Perhaps she should talk with him; he had to have seen something important. She wished she could remember his face more clearly.

It was Marigold’s turn to scowl in frustration.

“The Madness, Alice,” she waved a hand in the air as if to banish the thoughts distracting Alice. “It’s not right and you’re the only one who—”

“You don’t have a family mark,” Alice only meant to think it but the words slipped from her mouth in curiosity. The small tattoo beneath a person’s left eye symbolized which of the four Wonderland families they belonged to, but the space was blank on the other girl’s face. Alice spent a fair amount of time working in the same places as Marigold, seeing the girl often, yet somehow, she’d never noticed the absent mark. Or she had never remembered to notice.

“That’s not important—” Marigold huffed.

“You…you’re one of the Wandering Folk, aren’t you?” Despite the starlight white of her hair, she had the dusty brown complexion of a Wanderer and no mark. A sense of foreboding replaced her curiosity, but it wasn’t because of the wild stories people liked to tell of the Wandering Folk. Stories of unusual happenings whenever a Wanderer was around. Her heart felt heavy and pounded painfully behind her ribs. There was something else and she needed to get her journal. She could always find the answers within its pages.

“You need to stop this, Alice.” Marigold fidgeted more than ever, and the light coming through a window bounced off her pocket watch in sporadic flashes.

A door up the passage swung open with a bang and a river of servants poured in with a rush, scurrying this way and that. They barely acknowledged the two of them aside from not too politely telling them to move out of the middle of the corridor.

Marigold struggled a moment to speak above the hubbub, slowly being moved further away, but gave up and let herself be herded down the hall and through a door into the rest of the lodge—a mouse trapped in the current of a river. Alice ducked through the nearest door and took a moment to brush off her dress, tucking her hair behind her ears again. The red was no longer smeared on her hands; the painted corset untouched. Her mind had only been playing tricks on her.

“Well, that was interesting,” her hands were shaking, thoughts swirling with white roses dipped in red paint and Marigold’s gold watch and the strange man’s laughter. She strode in the direction of her room in search of her memorandum. But by the time she rounded the last corner, bedroom in sight, she wasn’t sure what she was looking for, what she meant to write down. Nothing of note had happened.

2

GARDEN OF PAINTED FLOWERS

Alice leaned her forehead against the cold glass of her window, peering down at the scurry of household staff on the front lawn. They were setting up a game of croquet and other preparations for a garden party. Her eyes traced the patterns created by the brackets and tables and canopies—spiraling inward like a snail shell or the petals of a rose. The hedge maze was just barely visible around the corner of the Lodge, but her room was on the opposite side of the recently vandalized rose garden and she couldn't tell if the offending painted flowers had been dealt with.

"Something is missing," she murmured, breath fogging the glass. The set up below was almost purposeful but not quite.

"Your focus for one, though certainly not only that," Kasei drawled.

Alice caught herself from showing her surprise, but the truth was she'd forgotten he was in the room.

"You were very close to causing real trouble earlier today. What do you have to say for yourself?" she turned from the activity on the lawn to arch a brow at the black cat. He sat on the end of her bed, like he hadn't moved at all since that morning, cleaning himself in such a way that his head kept trying to float off from the rest of his body.

"I was simply doing as you asked," he purred. "There are more important things to do than listen to that little girl try to rule a kingdom."

Alice chose not to comment on the scandalous remark about the queen, even if she agreed. It was easy to forget that the queen had only recently become that; she certainly looked not much older than Alice. Especially

when she was mad. It reminded her of someone she should have been able to picture, but it was no use without scrounging around for her journal.

She sorted through the dresses piled on her bed—outfits chosen for the garden party she was meant to be getting ready to attend. There was no time for musing about the queen's youth and forgotten people.

"What do you think? Blue or white?" she held up the dresses in questions.

"The dream was about hearts again," Kasei said.

"About…"

"Hearts, yes," he snatched at his head, but his ears continued up toward the ceiling. "One has gone missing."

Alice caught his ears and ushered them back down. Maybe she was the one going mad and not everyone else. "You really don't like making sense, do you?"

Kasei grinned, much too wide for his feline face. "It is a small consequence."

"I thought you might find it an interesting fact to add to your journal," he added.

"I never wrote about anything like that…" His words hovered at the fringe of her memory, familiar but there was no anchor to bring it to the front of her mind. She thought of the pattern made by the croquet brackets, not quite finished, and realized she'd never written down her dream from that morning. When she only continued to frown at him, he sighed and pointed a paw at her memorandum.

She marched over to her desk and picked up her journal.

"I fail to see how this conversation is relevant. The dreams are all the same," she said, leafing through the pages anyway. Images flashed by on the paper and she quickly flipped back. It was a sketch drawn a few weeks ago, according to the date; the last day of the early autumn winds. The girl in the picture was all quick lines and hasty smudges of charcoal instead of her usual ink. She stared out at nothing and black filled her eyes from end to end; a void that swallowed any light that might try to fill it. In the sketch, Alice had drawn strange marks like the impression of lightning during a storm that reached up the girl's neck.

"Her heart was stolen," Kasei purred.

She looked familiar; the curve of her jawline and mouth, the point of her narrow nose.

“That’s impossible,” The words tasted bitter and false in her mouth.

“Nothing is impossible, Alice.”

Alice shut the journal with a snap. The same feeling she had gotten rereading her dreams sent a shiver dancing across her shoulders and arms.

“This has nothing to do with my dreams,” she said too loudly, hoping the sound would chase away the unease that resettled in her gut. Kasei didn’t reply, but his face said it all; he thought she was being unnecessarily stubborn. He was being unnecessarily vague and roundabout, yet she couldn’t help trying to solve whatever riddle he was getting at.

“The flowers are what keep recurring, not hearts,” she mused. “And how can a heart go missing anyways?”

The answer was obvious, or at least Kasei’s sly smile suggested so and the patient twitch of his tail as he refused to offer it. She waited another second in silence, glaring at the cat.

“Follow what you least expect to find,” he finally replied. The sound of the garden party carried up to her room and she was suddenly reminded about her required attendance. All her thoughts shattered but the annoyance remained.

“Trying to make me late again?” she didn’t really want a reply as it would be nonsensical and didn’t wait for one. Dressing hastily, she paused long enough to check her reflection in the tall mirror built into the dresser to ensure the white lace dress was suitable—accented with a red coat and ribbons around the waist. The colors were that of the vandalized rose garden. There was no time to change and she just had to hope the queen didn’t notice and decided to be angry. She braided another ribbon into her hair, a few pale wisps framing her narrow face, and finally tucked the memorandum into her pocket before leaving the bedroom.

Kasei watched her leave without a word. Thoughts of hearts left behind.

MARIGOLD RAN into her wandering the lodge halls. The collision sent them both reeling back a step and Alice reached a hand to steady the other girl and keep her from tumbling to the ground.

“Ms. Alice!” Marigold exclaimed as though they hadn’t just smacked heads. “The queen asked that I make sure you found the proper garden.”

“Well, that was kind of her,” There was only one garden on the whole property and Alice had been to it numerous times; there should have been no need to send an escort. Yet she’d spent the better part of a half hour

marching circles inside the lodge looking for the door that led outside. The exasperation must have shown in her voice.

Marigold offered a nervous smile but her gaze was intent. “You shouldn’t blame yourself for not remembering the way.”

Alice waved a dismissive hand, trying to hide her discomfort and fell into step beside the other girl. “I blame whoever decided to put so many doors in this building.”

A dimple appeared on Marigold’s cheek; her mouth pressed into a disappointed pout by Alice’s answer, but she said nothing. Alice found herself searching her face for the familiar traces of the girl in her journal and was startled again at Marigold’s obvious heritage. There was some debate as to whether the Wandering Folk were true Wonderlanders, not that she recalled the arguments for or against, but even so she felt the unease which came with being around a Wanderer. An otherness surrounded them in a way that was possibly dangerous and unnervingly familiar.

If Marigold noticed her examination, she didn’t show it.

The sound of chatting voices and light music drifted up the corridor as they neared the end of it. Alice allowed Marigold to open the door and usher her into the parlor; a wall of glass doors had been thrown open directly opposite. People dressed up in lace and chiffon tea gowns underneath fur lined coats, dapper suits and shiny shoes and soft leather gloves, spilled out onto the lawn. From this level, the tables looked less like a snail and more randomly placed, piled high with pastries and miniature cakes, little sandwiches and platters of meat and cheese. The largest held the tea—pots and cups, saucers and steepers and tins of loose leaf tea. The air was saturated with the aroma of herbs and spices and the subtle scent of rotting leaves. The forest border had slowly begun to change colors from vibrant green to reds and oranges.

“Is the queen—” Alice stopped short; Marigold was no longer next to her. “Oh.”

She hesitated on the step but saw no sign of the other girl. Down on the grass she wandered over to the table of food, hunger grumbling in her stomach. A member of the Club family staff handed her a porcelain plate with small blue forget-me-nots painted around the edge. The man was short and round and the club tattoo beneath his left eye reminded her of the trial that morning. Kasei had told her to look where she least expected to find something, or he had said something close to that.

“Have you seen Marigold around?” she asked the Club servant as he piled a generous helping of pink marshmallow fluff onto her plate.

“Mari… Oh, Ms. March!” he had an unpleasantly nasal tone and she couldn’t help but grimace a little at the bald spot right on the very top of his head. “I believe she went round toward the Maze. The croquet game is about to commence.”

Alice headed off in the direction he’d indicated, snatching a few cranberry and pear tarts on the way.

She made it around the first corner of the Lodge and the hedge maze came into view; it was still green despite the rest of the plants turning with the season and trellised white roses formed an arched entrance. The path branched off right inside of the maze and the unknown beckoned to her, whispering secrets hidden within the tall hedges.

Don’t let your curiosity get the better of your sense. Her eyes strayed across the green foliage, but Kasei was either invisible or not really there. It had not sounded like his voice, yet there weren’t many people who could talk in her head besides herself.

“Alice!” The Queen of Hearts’ shout was directly next to her and followed instantly by long slender fingers grasping her upper arm. “You’re late again.”

“Oh, bother! You made me drop the tarts,” Alice yelped with annoyance to hide her surprise though the queen was sure to have felt the way she’d jumped.

Queen Delaney glanced down at the reddish-purple splotch staining Alice’s white skirt, caused by the cranberry filling, like paint or blood. She laughed. A much too forceful sound with a flicker of doubt in her eyes that was gone in an instant.

“Isn’t that ironic,” her grip bordered on painful, long nails poking through the lace long sleeves of Alice’s dress and she pulled a handkerchief from her bodice. “Clean up.”

Alice wasn’t sure ironic was the word she’d meant, but based on the death hold and bared-teeth smile, the queen was in no mood to be corrected. Not that Alice could ever remember her being in that kind of mood.

She accepted the offered cloth and dabbed at the stain, which only made it worse.

“I shouldn’t have worn white,” she muttered to herself. Queen Delaney wore a fluttering dress that looked as though it had been attacked by

scissors; the color blended with the green of the changing woods and had large red roses painted on the fabric. Alice thought that was much more ironic, but said nothing.

“Always so clever,” the queen cooed, and Alice didn’t think she meant it as a compliment. She steered them away from the hedge maze to where a group was selecting mallets for the croquet game, Marigold among them as well as the king who appeared to be trying to listen to what the other girl was saying. From the vacant look in his eyes, she doubted he comprehended a single word. He had the same look as the drawing in her journal and she fished it out of her pocket. Marigold was bound to know something about the drawing, or the roses. The Wandering Folk were experts in all things strange.

A cry went up from a servant, announcing the game had begun.

“I’m afraid there is only one mallet left for you,” Alice startled at the king’s voice above her shoulder, her heart was going to give out if people continued to sneak up on her, and took a step away before turning. The man stood too close; his gaze focused on something above her head though his words had clearly been addressed to her. This close she could better see his face behind the mane of chocolate hair; young like the queen and he certainly looked how Alice imagined a king should—tall and strong. But his eyes unsettled her. They never focused properly even when he looked right at a person, and their color was an unnaturally vibrant blue that nearly swallowed the black of his pupils.

He also seemed oblivious to how incredibly simple he was. At least she was aware of her bad memory and tried to make up for it with her journal.

“Ah, yes… so there is,” she stammered. *How did you ever become king?*

“The pink ones are the best, but you are much more suited to blue, I think,” he turned his head to look at her and added a smile to his words. It was a handsome smile, but Alice shifted away a little more. Being stuck chatting with the king was about as useful as trying to understand Kasei. In fact, she couldn’t think of a single time when she’d even had a conversation with him without the queen close at hand to berate and fuss at him. Which made for less than pleasant interactions.

“Blue *is* my favorite color; however, I won’t be able to play this afternoon,” she shot a glance around and realized neither the queen or Marigold were nearby anymore. “Oh dear…”

The king followed her gaze and his brow drew together in confusion. “What—”

“Thank you!” Alice bobbed a curtsey and rushed off before he could finish.

A second scan of the croquet field showed no sign of Marigold. She marched back toward the hedge maze; she needed to talk to the other girl about Kasei’s riddle of hearts—a certainty in her that Marigold would know something, but was waylaid for what must have been the hundredth time by a Heart servant.

“You left your mallet,” the boy said it twice because he was soft spoken and Alice was too preoccupied with thoughts of Wandering Folk and missing hearts that she didn’t hear him the first time.

“I’m not playing,” she replied.

“The queen insists.”

There was no reason for the queen to insist. If anything, Alice felt like the woman was trying to keep an eye on her. She started to protest when a flash of red drew her attention to where Queen Delany stood, watching with dark expectant eyes. Alice pursed her lips, but snatched the mallet from the boy’s hands.

It was blue, a beautiful spring color, and the handle was skillfully carved in the likeness of a long-necked bird with the bill as the mallet head at the bottom. The little black painted eyes seemed to wink up at her. Everything had secrets, or she was seeing things. Both felt like plausible answers.

“Let the game begin!” the queen shouted, a glint in her eyes not unlike that of the bird mallet.

The rules for croquet were more than just confusing; Alice attempted to understand them once but eventually gave up—not even writing them down helped. Everybody started at the same time, and though she’d been told countless times it was a turn-based game, she was never sure when it was meant to be *her* turn, as if it had been specifically designed to stump her bad memory. She used the ensuing chaos to bat her ball forcefully across the lawn and into the hedge maze and disappeared after it.

“I don’t know how anyone can enjoy that,” she stashed the mallet in a hedge and marched off in search of Marigold, struggling to remember what exactly she needed to ask her, but a sense of urgency filled her chest and flowed out to her arms and legs. Her hands gripped the journal tightly.

There were clearings scattered about the maze, but she'd only ever seen them from the lodge windows. Marigold had to be in one and the maze was not so large that it should be difficult. The path turned left and she followed it. It turned right. Then left again, and left and left until she was certain she'd just walked in a circle. Her head spun and she paused, vision wavering and breath short. An unseasonable warmth snaked around her ankles and ruffled the hem of her dress.

"Oh no…" her legs buckled and she stumbled to a bench tucked away in an alcove. The dream slipped into the blank spots of her mind that had been too overstimulated by the tea party for her to have noticed it before. The smell of the roses assaulted her lungs and she imagined she could see the tall trees with their branches drooping toward the ground like rain and dripping red over the flowers. Something hard pressed against her chest, a crushing weight she could barely breathe around. A yellow light trying to escape from behind her ribs, and the feeling sent a shock of terror through her whole body.

I'm going to die. She thought, both hands pressed over her heart.

Footsteps approached where she slumped on the secluded bench and the low murmur of voices slogged her thoughts back from the dreaded dream. It took a moment for her to realize the sounds were coming from outside of her mind. She straightened with some effort and brushed a palm down both cheeks to dry them.

"Pull yourself together, Alice," she whispered, voice shaking slightly.

The people drew closer and she was able to distinguish words from the quiet conversation.

"I really think you should speak with her," Marigold's tone was anxious as ever and her companion made no reply right away.

"What am I supposed to say?" Alice's eyes widened at the sound of the king, his question full of confusion and desperation and Marigold heaved a patient sigh.

"Just answer whatever she asks," she tried to explain. "The Madness is getting worse, if we don't find the Caterpillar soon…"

Curiosity nearly had Alice ask aloud what they were talking about, but the dream had not quite let go of her and kept her mouth shut. It was Kasei's fault the thing felt so real, so much like a second presence draped around her shoulders, he was always telling her he could see it. She carefully peered out from the alcove; Marigold and the king had paused a

few yards up the path. He still held a green croquet mallet in one hand, wielding it like a sword, and the girl was checking her golden pocket watch every few seconds.

“She will never stand for it,” he said and there was a note of sadness in his voice; it sent a rush of pity through Alice for him.

Marigold looked up to reply, the expression in her soft pink eyes mirrored Alice’s feelings, but her shifting gaze caught on Alice spying and she jumped. Whether from excitement or surprise wasn’t clear, and a flicker of uncertainty flashed across her face yet was quickly replaced by a hopeful smile. Alice got the impression she’d thought it was someone else eavesdropping.

“It’s you!” Marigold hopped around the king and scurried to the alcove. “Just who we were looking for.”

“Oh, really?” Alice glanced at the king who ambled over to stand beside the other girl, too close again. The hesitance was evident in her tone, or else her face was still red from crying, because Marigold rushed to explain.

“This is very important,” she reached to snag hold of the king by his sleeve as if worried he’d wander off. “You have to talk to His Majesty about the hearts.”

“Oh?” Alice said again. Her quest came flooding back with her words; the drawing in her journal and Kasei talking in round about ways. Of course, her dream was meant to have nothing to do with missing hearts, yet she was convinced Marigold knew *something* about it. But what and why it felt important she hadn’t quite figured out.

The king, however, couldn’t possibly have a single useful thought in his pretty head.

Marigold started to worry a hole in her white silk gloves and the watch didn’t stay in her vest pocket for a full second as she constantly took it out. She had stopped bothering to even glance at the face and all her fidgeting made Alice restless and annoyed.

“I was hoping to talk with you,” Alice searched around the alcove for her journal before realizing it was already in her hands.

“I’m sure you’ll learn more important information from him.”

“I doubt it,” she muttered. The other girl went completely still at her words so suddenly that Alice froze as well.

“Things are never as simple as they seem, Alice, and neither are people. It’s dangerous to make assumptions like that.”

“It wasn’t a baseless assumption,” she retorted; guilt pricked her skin regardless.

“No one ever thinks they are,” The other girl’s frown remained, but she was no longer still, tugging at her shirt sleeve cuffs. She didn’t wait around for a reply and hurried around the nearest corner without a goodbye. Alice huffed a sigh and tucked a stray strand of hair back behind her ear, trying to put away her annoyance with it.

“Riddles are people,” she’d forgotten the king was there and spun to face him.

“Don’t you mean people are riddles?”

“No.”

She opened her mouth then shut it again. It never did any good to argue with Kasei and she got the impression a similar result would come of trying to correct his majesty. Perhaps the same madness ailed them both.

The dream still lingered around the alcove and she stood to pace the grass instead, not wanting it to catch her unawares again. She flipped through the pages of her journal and the king took a seat.

“Maybe if I talk to you Marigold will hold still long enough to answer my questions,” she wasn’t really talking to the king and he made no reply beyond a vague smile. The journal stopped at the drawing of the sightless girl. On the opposite page Alice had written “missing hearts” but there was no date to accompany the two-word entry. *Follow what you least expect to find.*

“Do you know anything about stealing hearts?” she asked.

“It is not easy,” he said, unhelpful as she had feared. “There must be so much fear in it, feeling empty inside and…and…”

She scribbled in her journal, not what the king had said but a doodle of the bird mallet lain across his lap. Flowers bloomed around the handle in her picture, much like the roses in her dream. The white roses peeked through the green foliage of the hedge behind him.

“I imagine it hurts less to have no heart,” she said absently, a part of her aware that her mind was wandering when it shouldn’t be. The king made a strange almost choking sound, a laugh that was more a sob, and Alice missed a step in her pacing.

“Death would feel less painful,” he said with such clarity and bitterness that she stopped trying to pace altogether. “There is nothing inside us;a

mind without any will to do its bidding. Barely puppets plagued by the mad —the mad—ma…”

His hands clenched into fists as he fought to compose himself again. A chill raced up her arms, the journal slipping from her grasp unnoticed.

“What?” she breathed, her mind catching on the word ‘us.’

“Balance, Alice. Things must be put right or Wonderland will destroy itself trying to mend the Madness.”

A terrible understanding stared up at her from the bench. An impossible reality.

She sat down and, with little concern for proper etiquette, shoved back the mess of hair that fell across his forehead and partly over his eyes. It had always given him an unkempt and absentminded air, but she never considered it had been done purposefully.

The king’s unnaturally blue eyes were not really his eyes and, looking closer, she could see how the contacts couldn’t quite hide the pitch black of them underneath. Her gaze dropped to his chest; a tailored black jacket fastened up to his collarbone with small heart-shaped ruby buttons. But ink tendrils peeked out from beneath the satin, spreading up toward his jaw like black veins.

“Your majesty…” she drew back her hand. “You don’t have a heart.”

The king stared blankly at her then smiled, it held no hint of humor and bordered on anguish.

“I haven’t for a long time,” he said, “And neither have you.”

The world tilted around her. She knew in her bones that what he said was true, yet she felt the rapid beating in her chest as she gasped for air. He may still be heartless but someone or something had given hers back.

“I don’t understand,” she held the edge of the stone bench like it would keep her afloat. “How did you lose…?’

“I didn’t,” he frowned, the vacant troubled look returning to his expression. “I let her… no she took—”

A loud shriek cut off whatever else he was going to say and Alice nearly jumped out of her skin, whirling toward the sound. She heard the clamor and commotion of too many voices in the direction of the croquet field—her name shouted above the rest. Dread pooled in her stomach, familiar and horrible and she wasn’t sure why. The king muttered anxiously to himself and Alice barely regained her feet when Marigold barreled

around the corner, unable to stop before crashing into her and sending them both toppling against the king. All three landed in a heap on the ground.

“It’s too late! Too late!” Marigold clambered upright again, talking between great gulps of air. Alice used the bench to pull herself off the ground and tried to brush the grass stains and dirt from her white dress.

“What are you talking about?” she demanded, anger rose in her chest as she desperately tried to hold onto what the king had just revealed.

“She’s coming,” the girl exclaimed. She was yanking so hard on her pocket watch that the chain snapped and she was left to stare bewildered at the dangling end.

“Who?”

But the answer came charging around the bend of green foliage. Alice’s eyes told her the Queen of Hearts had materialized from the hedges themselves and fury radiated off her like waves of heat.

“What are you doing?!” she seethed, Alice was unsure who she was addressing.

“Your highness, I think there’s something you should know—”

“Not you!” she snapped. “Marigold, explain yourself.”

Alice glanced at the other girl, indignant at being dismissed.

“There is no other way,” Marigold squeaked out.

“You had no right!” the queen was starting to look more worried than angry, her cheeks tinged red and eyes wide. It made her look too young for the crown which sat crooked on her dark curls.

“But I’ve learned something—” Alice stepped in front of the queen.

“SHUT UP!” Queen Delaney shook so violently that the rose studded crown toppled to the grass. “You are ruining everything!”

Alice blinked several times, her own angry words shrinking inside her at the outburst. She glanced down at the king then back to the queen. “I don’t understand…you already know?”

Marigold made a strangled noise and flapped her hands frantically at Alice, but it was impossible to tell if she meant for her to be quiet or if she was pleased at the discovery. The king finally got to his feet, straightening to his full height which was taller than all three women.

“My darling knows everything, Alice,” he said in a surprisingly clear tone. “Almost everything.”

The almost was a riddle in and of itself and both Marigold and the king gave it to Alice. She turned to look at the queen and finally put together

what he had been saying before they were interrupted—what Kasei had been alluding to that morning.

“You took his heart.” A stillness fell over them at her accusation. Queen Delaney cupped a hand under Alice’s chin, the touch gentle, and she didn’t move. Something inside her softened even as her heartbeat sped up.

“You have no idea,” the queen’s grip did not tighten, but Alice felt her nails pressed against her cheek.

“I don’t—”

“Understand?” Queen Delaney interrupted. Her words quiet, for Alice only, though not another sound came from the others that they could all hear her. “You never have, nor wanted to, and you never will.”

“Then tell me!” Alice lifted her hand to catch hold of the queen’s wrist and almost pushed her away. Card soldiers appeared on either end of the maze corridor, blocking any sort of escape she may have considered.

“You always were the clever one, Alice. Figure it out yourself.”

The sun reflected off the polished silver spear heads of the soldiers as they leveled them at Alice. Marigold stood by helplessly and the king made no move to assist or hinder as the queen ordered her thrown into the dungeon. The last thing Alice saw before she was dragged out of the maze was the flicker of a cat’s grin, perched above the queen’s shoulder, and two slit cobalt eyes watching her.

3

MOUSE AND MADNESS

The Royal Hunting Lodge had no real prison, only a cellar dug into the ground behind the main building. The floor and walls were mismatched stones and packed earth. Iron bars had been installed and already flecked rust when touched. It was full of plants. Slimy red vines crept along the flagstones and up the bars, mold scented moss glowed a sickly green in the dim corners, and strange wide-leaved things fanned near invisible motes of pollen from their precarious perch in the ceiling. Alice couldn't identify half of the foliage which spilled from every crevice and crack like autumn had no meaning, death and rot had no impression on the skinny grass like flowers that poked up through the mattress in the corner and swayed in a non-existent breeze. The faded light of evening barely made it past the vines choking the small barred window in the cellar's door.

She had already exhausted herself pacing and shouting and trying to reason with herself, and finally slumped on a cleared spot of ground with her journal open in her lap. The more she turned the pages the more her conversation with the king took root in her chest; the girl in the drawing was herself—heartless black eyes and empty inside. But who had given her heart back? Was it the queen or someone else?

A quiet voice in the back of her mind whispered another question: why could she not remember any of it?

"This doesn't make sense," she said aloud, tired of only hearing the drip, drip, drip of water she couldn't locate and her own thoughts trapped in

her head. A few wide yellow leaves fanned in her direction and she batted them away.

“By the Well, I thought you’d died,” it was a male voice and Alice stared in alarm at the leaves, reason telling her that of course it wasn’t the plants, but too many strange things had happened for the thought not to cross her mind.

“It would be no surprise if all of you were used up after the racket you made earlier,” laughter hummed beneath the words and Alice followed the sound to the cell next to hers. A wall of vines and moss blocked her view. She stood slowly and approached the bars, lifting a hand to push aside more hanging leaves.

The cell beyond was no less of a forest than hers, yet the plants were bursting with bright flowers that should not have still been alive this late into the autumn winds. She even caught sight of a few insects buzzing around in search of nectar. There was proper furnishing as well, or at least there was furnishing. A table with lopsided legs had been placed against the far wall, set for tea complete with a white table cloth, and copper pot, which tried valiantly to fight against the strong earthy smell of the prison with that of spiced tea. It was losing the battle, but none of that was nearly as interesting to Alice as the occupant of the table's only chair.

He lounged with long legs stretched out so that his feet rested in a clump of vines a little off the ground. She wondered how long he had been in that position as the small green leaves had started to grow over his scuffed boots. His clothes were similarly stagnant; wrinkled and patched trousers and a buttoned shirt, which had once been a color but was now a completely different one, with sleeves cut short and fraying terribly. The top half of his face was covered by a fringe of two-toned hair, black on one side and near white on the other, and the bottom half of his face was covered by a surprisingly delicate tea cup. Steam swirled up from the warm liquid inside.

“You’re not the club knave,” Alice frowned and searched her brain, a nagging familiarity just on the edge of her consciousness. A patchwork jacket draped over the back of his chair.

“That depends on who you ask,” I man shrugged. “I am certainly *a knave*, but I am not *the knave* who was accused of painting that tart's roses.”

Alice gaped at him, offended on behalf of the queen before remembering she was the one who’d thrown her down here. “Why are you

here then?”

“Hmm, you ask a lot of questions,” he finally set down the tea cup, reaching to refill it. “I’m here because our darling Queen Delaney doesn’t like being laughed at.”

“Oh! You’re the stupid witness,” the confusion fell away as she recognized the man’s eccentric jacket from the trial. How he had been able to see Kasei when no one else ever had?

“Don’t act like you weren’t laughing too,” he said, teasing in his voice.

“How long have you been here?” she asked, the trial had to have been recent yet he looked as though weeks had passed with him unmoved.

“Not much longer now that you’re here, that’s for sure,” laughter floated under his words that made her hesitate.

“You seem rather confident about that…”

“You seem rather *lacking* confidence for such a curious girl,” he set down his cup again and shoved back the hair from his eyes to stare at her more clearly. The face revealed by the movement was almost skull-like; narrow and pale with a thin mouth that eagerly awaited a chance to grin and she didn’t think it would be a particularly friendly one.

Alice did not like it one bit. Even at the same time her heart skipped a beat.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she said and let the curtain of leaves fall back in place, obscuring his view of her and her of him.

“Wait!” There was a loud crash and general commotion as he tripped across his cell and tore away the vines she’d just replaced. “I have to ask you something.”

Alice arched an eyebrow up at his skeletal face and had to blink several times at the strong waft of petrichor and spiced tea that followed him.

“What?” she attempted a patient tone and thought it sounded more like she was talking to a small child.

“You have very familiar eyes,” it wasn’t a question, or necessary for him to point out. His own gaze was as mis-matched as his hair. “Where did you get them?”

“What a stupid question,” Alice blurted out before she could think otherwise.

“I’d say it was reasonable,” he shrugged, unoffended. “I usually don’t remember faces.”

“Well, I got them where all children get their eyes.”

“Your tragic childhood.”

“What? No, my parents,” she scowled at him, incredulous, but his words had nudged something in the back of her mind.

“You must have had unhappy parents for them to give you such sad eyes,” he laughed, which seemed an inappropriate response. She couldn’t remember her parents, and it wasn’t in the same way she often forgot things she’d done the day or even hours before. It was a fuzziness that felt natural—a long-ago ache that had since healed.

“I didn’t really know them,” yet she had known someone who was a mother, and she could almost bring their face into focus. But it was like trying to remember one of her dreams and kept slipping away from her grasp. She marched over to where her journal lay on the dusty floor and leafed through the pages again. The drawing of the king’s croquet mallet was all she found beneath her entry of missing hearts; her self-portrait staring blankly at her from the opposite page.

“What are you looking for?” Her cell neighbor called, leaning against the bars in an attempt to see the journal.

“Almost,” she answered. “Something is happening and I can’t remember what. I should know, but I don’t.”

“It’s the Madness,” Marigold’s voice startled her and she spun toward the front of her cell. “I’ve been trying to tell you for weeks now about it, but you couldn’t understand without your heart.”

A patch of sunset light cast the other girl’s shadow across the floor from the open door behind her, the reddish orange light a glow around her body. Her words triggered the conversation they had had right after the trial.

“Why did she give it back?” Alice rushed to the cell door, ignoring the fuzzy stalks of creeping ivy to grab the metal bars.

“She gave it back because she needs something from you,” Marigold had fixed the chain of her pocket watch and was fidgeting with it again. “I don’t know what, but I do know this Madness is consuming Wonderland; just look around you at all this. It’s not natural and is affecting more than just the plant life.”

“But what can I do about the Madness?” Alice knew the answer before asking, or a part of her did. Hot tears prickled behind her eyes, a rush of hurt so sudden they spilled down her cheeks without warning. She quickly dashed them away in confusion.

“There is something very, very important you know Alice,” Marigold stepped closer, placing a hand over Alice’s on the cell bars. “You need to remember, worse things than eccentric foliage are coming.”

She hated how much she understood. Because it wasn’t really a clear thought, just a feeling deep in her gut and the terrible realization that her memories were missing—like her heart had been. Something in her stolen past was the key to everything; the Madness, the king’s missing heart, the queen. And she needed to get it back.

“Can you help me?”

Marigold shifted from foot to foot, gaze darting from her to the still open door. “Not as much as you need, but there is someone who can.”

“Ah, curiouser and curiouser!” her cell neighbor exclaimed, reminding her of his presence. Marigold snapped her attention to him and for a whole second did not move, pink eyes wide and a look behind them Alice thought might be fear. Or merely unsure what to say in reply.

“You need to go before the queen notices,” she said, not acknowledging the man’s statement. She had to tear away several vines Alice was sure had just grown over the keyhole during their conversation and fumbled with a large golden key. The door creaked open just wide enough for Alice to squeeze through, accidently taking a few verdant leaves with her.

Marigold started for the exit but Alice hesitated.

“Wait, he needs to come too.”

“Him?” the other girl was fidgeting more nervously than ever. “We don’t have time—”

“We can’t leave him here for her to have his head cut off or whatever other horrid thing she fancies doing when she learns I escaped,” Alice couldn’t quite explain what else made her dread the idea of the queen holding the strange man prisoner. Something he had said needled at her and she needed to remember what.

He watched them from his cell, still leaning where he and Alice had been talking, a curious smile on his lips.

Marigold let out a distressed sigh and dropped the key as she tried handing it to Alice.

“Tea and biscuits, hurry! I’m late, I’m late.”

Alice darted to her neighbor’s cell and slotted the key. Lateness was not tolerated in Queen Delaney’s court and the royal assistant’s absence was going to be noticed immediately.

“What exactly are you hoping for in return for freeing me?” the man loomed over her and for a moment her vision lazily turned on its head as her nostrils were hit with his peculiar scent of rain and cardamon. The dizzy spell passed and she yanked open the cell.

“Your help.”

He smiled again, but it twisted into more of a grimace.

“You need to go!” Marigold had marched down from the prison door and grabbed Alice by the arm, hauling her up and out into the purple twilight. Alice snatched at the man’s jacket and pulled him along.

“There is a Wanderer’s Caravan just outside the Hunting Lodge grounds, that is where you’ll find the person who can help.” The other girl eyed the hand Alice had on him but did not comment.

“Who is it?” Alice was starting to feel as though Marigold was being purposefully unclear.

A shout carried from somewhere on the other side of Lodge.

“My brother,” Marigold bolted for the nearest door, calling over her shoulder. “You have to remember, Alice!”

Warm blue light flashed briefly as the servant door opened then closed, and they were left standing in the chill autumn as nightfall sank into the air around them. Alice still wore the white lace dress from the garden party; a few green stains marred the hem and the dark spot of spilled cranberry filling looked black. She shivered and frowned at the fog of breath that lifted from her mouth. There was a great urgency inside her, but the cold chased away what exactly she was meant to be doing; all she knew was the light and warm glow from the lodge windows.

“I believe we want to go this way,” the man pointed in the opposite direction she had been about to walk, away from the building. At the sight of him her thoughts were reordered; Marigold’s request and instructions and her own missing memories.

“Oh, right,” she pursed her lips and stared into the shadow-filled edges of the lawn. “I don’t actually know how to leave the Hunting Lodge. I can’t remember coming here in the first place.”

Frustration slipped into her words; she could feel the recollection skirting around in her head like a scared rabbit refusing to be caught. He smiled wide and swept an elaborate bow.

“Follow me.”

ORANGE LIGHT DANCED between the trees and the chill breeze carried with it a scent of smoke and lilting music. Alice glanced back but could no longer see the blue glow of moon mushrooms in the Lodge windows. Tall black silhouettes of trees and the rustle of fallen leaves were the only things behind them.

“What is your name?” she held the back of the man’s patchwork jacket and tried to keep her mind from wandering too much as they maneuvered around a batch of thorn bushes. “I don’t think you ever said.”

“You may call me Hatter,” teasing hid beneath his casual tone and she could see his smile even though his back was turned.

He’s not even wearing a hat, she thought but said; “That’s an unusual name.”

“I like to think so,” he answered cheerily, and Alice huffed. She couldn’t figure out what he found so amusing all the time and his conversations reminded her too much of Kasei, meaning they didn’t often make sense.

The lights grew brighter and showed themselves to be campfires. Brightly dressed people crowded around the flames; laughter and music spilled around them in turn and danced off the covered wagons set in a wide circle. The sight of them made Alice freeze, her feet taking root in a bed of dead leaves and her heart speeding up considerably. It beat against her ribs as though trying to pull her in the opposite direction.

“Why are they not good?” she murmured to herself and squinted at the Caravan of the Wandering Folk. For the first time she wished she could remember who had told her all the troublesome stories of the Folk. Something to ground herself better.

“They aren’t as bad as some,” Hatter said. “Come on, shall we find our friend?”

Alice still had a firm grip on his jacket and was forced to move when he did or be pulled off balance.

A short, stout woman noticed them first, entering the circle of light around the nearest campfire. Alice stared at the flames, mesmerized by the movement and sound of crackling wood. So alive where the moon mushrooms were a soft, slow sort of growth. Fire was too unpredictable for most people; it was rare indeed to find a single Wonderland home that did not use moon mushrooms instead. Alice liked the heat that emanated from

the dancing light and an odd sense of comfort from the closeness the Wanderers shared while enjoying it.

“Moss, you say?” the woman’s voice was rough like smoke and loud. Alice started and blinked several times to clear her vision. White roses imprinted on her eyelids whenever she closed them. *Bother that dream.*

“Yes, Moss,” Hatter stared intently at the woman. Her face scrunched up like a wrinkled apple and Alice caught several furtive glances thrown between the other Wanderers at the campfire.

“We are on a very important errand,” Alice explained, stepping to stand next to Hatter and met the woman’s strange pale eyes. They were red in the firelight. “Marigold sent us and there is no time to waste.”

For a brief second the Wanderer gaped at her, surprised, and a crease of fear in her brow. She quickly recovered and Alice knew she wouldn’t remember to write down the torrent of questions that rushed in its wake. Had she thought she was someone else, or did she know Alice?

“Up that way,” the woman said, caution heavy in her tone. “In the abandoned mansion that used to be part of the Lodge.”

Hatter rested a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Excellent!”

He said it too loudly in Alice’s opinion, but she didn’t say anything. They left the Wandering Folk and followed the overgrown dirt path the woman had indicated; Alice could feel their collective gazes watching till they disappeared around the first bend. She could still see the fires, but the trees and unruly bramble obscured the people.

“Curious…” she fetched her journal out from the pocket of her dress and used the moonlight to find a blank page. The light was uncertain, dappled by leafy shadows, and she wrote a sentence and then crossed it out again. Wrote two words and circled them.

White Roses.

Two more words.

White Rabbits.

She scratched a line through the ‘s’ on the last word. “Follow the white rabbit…”

“Alice!” Hatter stood right next to her. Alice yelped and slammed the journal shut to keep from dropping it.

“Stop that!” she snapped. He grinned.

“As you wish. But I’m sure you are getting more stains on your dress.”

Alice glanced down and realized that she was seated on the ground, legs crossed and a particularly pointy rock poking her backside. Panic flooded her limbs and she scrambled to her feet, nearly catching a heel in the skirts of her dress. She didn't remember sitting down, or what she'd found so important to write. Hatter looked like he meant to say something that was going to be unhelpful or silly and Alice quickly stepped past him and marched along the path.

"Come on," she said. "No time to lose."

Would her memory keep getting worse if she wasn't able to restore them soon?

A building rose up out of the forest before them, or at least that is what it looked to do. The mansion was short and wide and surrounded by tall overgrown hedges. In fact, everything about the place was overgrown much like the forest it lived in; weeds poked out of the untidy gravel walk which stretched under a metal gate and led into the front yard. Ivy scaled rampant across the red bricks and not a single light could be seen behind the blank staring windows, of which there were many.

"Doesn't appear anyone is home," Hatter clambered over a low spot in the hedge around the side of the gate then followed Alice up to the front door. She walked under the curved metal coat of arms and frowned at him the whole way.

"The Folk said it was abandoned."

He gave the bell cord a tug and from somewhere deep in the mansion, a clang echoed hollowly. Alice pulled back hair which had long since escaped their two braids and fastened them with the ribbon from her dress.

"Marigold said someone would be waiting at the Caravan…why is he here and not there?" she said after a pause. A square plaque caught her attention, embedded into the wood of the front door, and she carefully wiped the dirt and grim from its silvery surface.

March Family Mansion.

The name was familiar and she could just put a face to it—white braids and ever shifting eyes, her mouth pinched in constant worry. But the sound of breaking glass drew her thoughts away from Marigold and to the window Hatter had just thrown a rock through.

"What are you doing?!"

"Breaking and entering."

"What about just trying the front door? It might be unlocked."

The handle clicked loudly in the stillness of the yard and Alice shoved open the heavy wooden door. Hatter ignored the look she shot at him, sharp enough to cut stone, and sidled past her into the main entry.

“Vagabond,” she muttered under her breath and followed him inside.

The interior of March Mansion was covered in dust and cobwebs, phantom shapes that hung from a large chandelier and draped over the white sheets which wrapped unidentifiable pieces of furniture. Another, normal-sized door stood right across from the main entrance and two more darkened the walls on either side of them. None were open, but the faint scent of burning wood lingered in the stale air and suggested the building was not as abandoned as it first appeared.

“Shall I pick, or shall you?” Hatter turned a circle in the middle of the room, eyeing each doorway with suspicious glee.

“I shall,” Alice quickly said, marching to the door on her left. A waft of aromas blasted from the room beyond and she sneezed. The action sent her whole body stumbling back with the force of it, and she tried to keep the second one from coming and failed. A third sneeze followed swiftly and she sat down hard on a nearby bench. Or at least she assumed it was a bench underneath the ghostly sheet.

“What in Wonderland is that smell?” she demanded, eyes watery and nose running. Hatter had removed himself to the furthest corner from the open door and held a handkerchief over his mouth and nose.

“Pepper,” he responded.

Alice thought she might sneeze again but managed to stop it.

“We are taking a different door.”

“I whole-heartedly agree,” he yanked open the door opposite hers and motioned her through. She accepted the offered kerchief as she passed, a different one then he held, and blew her nose loudly several times. He shut the door behind them.

Alice tried to see the room through bleary eyes but could only make out more white wrapped shapes of varying sizes. Faint moonlight stretched its fingers through broken windows and the shadows crawled away from it across the floor and walls in a way that made Alice feel like something stood just outside of her periphery. They continued on through another door and then another and another, each room only marginally different to the last, till a headache started to form at the base of her skull.

“Perhaps the Wanderer gave us the wrong address,” Alice finally said. They had climbed an endless flight of stairs and found themselves standing in front of a plain wooden door. The stairwell was narrow and slit windows at irregular intervals proved poor lighting; she had stubbed her toes several times already.

“Are there many abandoned mansions in these woods?” he asked in such a way that implied he already knew the answer. Alice had a mind to throw something at him, but the only thing on hand was her journal and she wasn’t about to lose that.

“How should I know,” she muttered. The curled metal handle was cold to the touch but gave little resistance to being opened.

“Why do you suppose it was abandoned?” she asked as they stepped into a small round room; it couldn’t have been much bigger than her bedroom back at the Hunting Lodge.

“Some places aren’t meant to be lived in,” he flicked a trailing cobweb off his trousers. “Even if they don’t start out that way.”

In the very center of the near empty room stood a high-backed armchair, clean of dust and white sheet, and a small wood stove next to it which burned with a steady amber glow. For a moment they both stared at the chair, Alice’s next question forgotten on the tip of her tongue. She had started to get used to not finding anything.

“Hello?” she crept around to peer at the person slouched in the seat.

“Well, that is unexpected,” Hatter came around the other side and stared down at the little boy curled up and fast asleep. A wave of familiarity rose inside Alice and she leaned closer, eyeing the messy white hair that fell across dusty brown skin, the white vest, and trousers over a dark colored shirt. He had the same round nose that twitched nervously in his sleep.

“Wake up,” Hatter reached over and pinched the boy right on the nose before Alice could stop him. She smacked his arm anyway.

“Don’t do that!” she hissed.

The boy scrunched up his nose and yawned wide, stretching up from his slumped position. They both leaned back to avoid a fist in the face by accident.

“Who are you?” The boy couldn’t be more than ten or eleven years of age; his feet didn’t touch the ground when sitting up. He sounded more curious than concerned.

“I’m Alice, your sister sent us to speak with you about…” she faltered, the reason for their visit slipping away from her mind the more she tried to grasp it. He was so much younger than she had expected. The boy’s head began to nod and Hatter pinched him again.

“Mari sent you?” the boy shook himself though Alice could see no change to the sleep which drooped his shoulders. “What for?”

“You know something about…the missing heart? The king’s, that is,” Alice paged through her journal while sending a scowl at Hatter who merely shrugged. That wasn’t what she really wanted to ask the boy about, but she wasn’t finding the true question written down.

Silence met her words and for a moment she worried the boy had gone back to sleep after all. She caught hold of Hatter’s arm before he could reach him for a third time and asked again, slightly louder:

“She said you know—”

“I don’t know anything,” the little boy interrupted. “But I know someone who does.”

There was a hint of drowsy worry in his voice, and he hugged his arms around his body. Alice bit her lip, forcing her fingers to loosen their hold on the journal and drew in a deep breath. It was starting to feel like she was running in circles; always sent to someone else by someone else and never able to catch the answers she chased.

“Alright, can you tell me wher—” she was cut off again by a loud, piercing shriek.

Hatter tripped over his feet as Alice stumbled back, a firm grip still on his arm. They both hit the floor with a thud and he let out a string of words she didn’t recognize but could easily guess their meaning. The horrible scream dissolved into hysterical laughter that eventually turned to hiccups of mirth. The little boy’s face was stretched into a grin so wide it made his front two teeth stick out like a rabbit.

“I’m right here,” he giggled. “Little mousy Moss has trouble remembering, so I do it for him.”

The air felt tight in her lungs for a long minute, the pain in her tailbone forgotten instantly, and she struggled to form a proper sentence.

“Ha! Imagine that,” Hatter didn’t look nearly as horrified as Alice felt, and got back to his feet in one quick motion. “Care for some tea, not mousy Moss?”

“I don’t understand?” Alice shook herself to clear her mind, not that it did much good, and scrambled to her feet again. She was beginning to loathe her own ignorance. And her tendency to startle easily.

“There are two of me; one to remember and one to remain blissfully forgetful,” Marigold’s brother nodded to accept Hatter’s offer of tea and Alice managed to stop herself from demanding why the man had a small teapot and cup in his jacket. She thought it might be different to the one he’d had back at the Lodge.

“And you are the one who remembers…but why are there two of you?”

“It’s rude to ask personal questions,” Hatter remarked, setting the pot on top of the woodstove.

Alice ignored him. She was not asking the right questions, but she hoped if she kept talking her brain would come around to what she needed to do. She didn’t have time to get distracted, even if she couldn’t properly explain the feeling of urgency in her gut.

“It’s simple really,” Moss replied. He fished into the pocket of his pristine white trousers and pulled out two hair ties which he used to messily secure his hair, the result two pigtails that resampled floppy rabbit ears. But her attention was fixed on the boy’s eyes.

Glossy black from end to end like the girl in her drawing, like the king. He had no heart.

“That’s impossible,” the certainty with which the words fell from her mouth surprised even her.

“Anything’s possible if you know the right Folk,” Moss waggled his eyebrows.

“Or the wrong ones,” Hatter added, gaze stuck to the stove so that he did not see the irritated face Alice made at him.

“The queen took your heart as well as the king’s? And mine?” saying it aloud felt wrong, backwards, or sideways and she just couldn’t put her finger on why. Or rather, she knew why she didn’t know but not *what*. She needed to get her memory back.

“No,” the boy accepted a steaming cup of tea from Hatter. Alice waited but he did not elaborate.

“Tea?” Warm steam curled up into her face from the cup Hatter held beneath her nose.

“What? Oh, bother you,” she took the drink and continued to watch Moss with furrowed brow. “How can you help then?”

“I know who has your memory,” Moss shrugged, mischief in his black eyes. “If Mari sent you, then I will take you to them.”

A thousand feelings opened inside of her, and it was like the moon finally sliding from behind dark clouds. For whatever reason, she was the only one who knew what the queen had done, and what she was planning to do. If she didn’t get her memory back, then the Madness Marigold mentioned would get worse. Though Alice had a hard time imagining what it all meant a dark sense of purpose settled in her chest, a fist that curled around the light in her heart.

“How did Marigold know my memory was stolen?” she asked.

“Oh, she did tell me that,” the boy sniffed at the hot tea but his gaze stayed on her. “She just told me how to find it.”

Alice felt close to bursting with all the questions raging inside of her, but they flitted out of reach each time she tried to voice them because her mind was broken. She stared down at her journal; the soft grey leather binding had been nicked and scratched by their jaunt from the lodge to the caravan and here, March Mansion. A part of her had to remember, somehow, even just a little bit, and it would all be within the pages of her memorandum. She needed to figure out the right questions to understand it.

“How?” the only word she was able to get past her thoughts.

The moonlight reflected in Moss’s heartless gaze, but the look was less empty than the king's—filled with a spark that reminded her of the too vibrant plants crawling up out of the ground in the cells. Of the hum in the air when the knaves trial dissolved into chaos. A hint of Madness.

Would that have been me? She pressed a hand over her beating heart. *Will something worse happen if I don’t get my memory back?*

One to remember and one to forget. Moss’s words filled her head. A trickle of apprehension trailed cold down her back, right along her spine. A whisper of warning; hurry, hurry, Alice. The little boy grinned over the rim of his tea cup as if he’d read her mind.

CONTRARY TO WHAT Alice tried to insist, Moss refused to leave immediately. They were to wait till day break before starting their journey. Mad Moss retreated and Mousy Moss reemerged and promptly fell asleep, refusing to tell her who had her memory or even his plan for the morning.

Hatter uncovered the only other piece of furniture in the room; a couch with ugly upholstery Alice thought was meant to be a pattern of Spades and

Clubs in alternating squares, but looked more like someone had thrown globs of red and black mud at it. She settled onto one side of the couch, the fatigue from all that previous day finally catching up with her body, and carefully turned through her journal.

She scratched out what she could remember of Moss's words, the helpful ones anyways, which turned out to be hardly anything. He only created more questions.

Who is he taking us to see? She circled the words. *Why is the king's heart missing? What is Wonderland's Madness?*

A whisper fluttered across the back of her neck; the touch like a memory too old to recall or a dream seen through the fog of waking. A puzzle piece that did not fit.

"Those are lovely," Hatter stood in front of her, jarring her from her thoughts, and stared down at the little doodles she'd been sketching absently. "Are they flowers from back home?"

Alice furrowed her brow at what her hands had been drawing without her knowledge and realized she had started to dream. Full petaled roses burst from thorny bushes and swayed in an invisible wind; the ghostly outline of a girl half finished among them. She snapped the journal shut.

"Please don't read over my shoulder," she forced the panic to remain out of her voice, tipped her frown up to his narrow face. "It's rude."

"I wasn't reading over your shoulder," he replied with a silent smile that sparkled in his mis-matched eyes. She noticed then that they weren't black and white like she'd thought, but a very dark green and pale lavender purple. "That would require me to be standing behind you."

Alice sighed and he laughed.

"Are you planning on drinking that?" he motioned to the cup he'd given her earlier. It teetered on the cushion beside her—the murky liquid no longer giving off heat. She'd have rather had a proper meal, but a drink would help with the tiny pricks of hunger.

She sniffed the tea; spice and earth and something else that made her stomach flutter. Even cold, the taste filled her mouth and nose; it warmed all the way down her throat and spread into the rest of her body like it was glowing.

"Oh." It was delicious and the feeling that bloomed behind her ribcage was terribly close to nostalgia and sent a tingle up her spine. Perhaps it was the sweetness of molasses.

“You like it?” he was peering at her face closely, eagerly, and his grin widened when she nodded.

“What is…?” she trailed off, swirling the drink and staring at the little flecks of leaves at the bottom of the cup. “The tea, I mean.”

“I am the only living soul who can make it. The queen was furious when I refused to tell her how,” he gazed fondly into the distance at the memory.

“It doesn’t take much to make her furious,” Alice chuckled and took another sip; the heat in her belly banished the knot of hunger. By the third sip her lungs felt hollowed out, head light and heavy at the same time. The tea spun in a steady circle in its cup even though she wasn’t moving it.

“She is quite the tyrant,” his tone implied a question and Alice opened her mouth to argue, feeling the need to defend Queen Delaney.

“No, she just…she’s just…” she blinked stars from her vision. “What did you say this tea was? I’m feeling funny.”

“I don’t think there’s a risk of you being funny, Alice,” he snorted, leaning back on his heels. She tried to look up at him but got halfway to the top of his wrinkled button shirt and feared she would topple from the couch if she tried to keep going. A much more real fear rose underneath the lightheadedness and she hastily set down the tea cup.

“The blend does wonders for restoring the mind, however. I use rose petals,” he continued, snatching the cup before it could tip from the arm of the couch and hit the floor.

“It certainly does not clear the mind,” she said.

“Unfortunate side effects may include a hint of madness.”

Alarm sparked in her chest, banishing the dizziness, and she clutched her stomach.

“What do you mean madness? Why would you drink that?!”

Hatter’s laughter rang out in the small room; he bent double and crowed for a long minute which was too long in Alice’s opinion. And not very funny.

“Go rest or something, Hatter,” she scowled, and tried to decide whether she felt nauseous.

He obliged without argument, shaking out the white sheet, which caused dust to be flung into the air and both he and Alice coughed. Moss sneezed in his sleep. It did not strike her as the most comfortable place to lay down, but he at least stopped talking.

The strange sensation of the tea dissipated, and Alice felt her mind clear as though she’d been asleep for a long, long time. She scribbled away in the journal; finishing the drawing of the girl all the way up to her face which remained a dark smudge no matter how hard she tried to imagine it. Sleep finally wrapped its arms around her, and on the cusp of the dark she noticed a short stone structure in the drawing—like a broken wall or a well with its roof collapsed.

4

NO NAME WOOD

Morning arrived with sunlight blaring through the tower's four round windows and the wail of hunting horns. All three occupants of March Mansion jumped awake at the sound.

"What was that?" Alice rushed blearily to the closest window and fumbled the latch open. A chill autumn breeze brushed the hair from her face, carrying with it the scent of turning seasons. But a brighter scent hung too warm beneath it and sent a shiver down her arms.

"I believe our absence has been noticed," Hatter stretched out stiff limbs and produced his tea set again.

The room was at the topmost point of the mansion and looked down on the untidy front yard. Her vantage point and the gently rising sun revealed an equally overgrown garden off to one side, and she could just make out the path she and Hatter had followed. The trees she had thought were part of the forest were only a sparse promenade. A short distance away smoke rose lazily into the morning sky from the Wandering Folk's caravan at the edge of the wood proper and further past that the sharp angled towers of the Hunting lodge poked out of the leafy canopy. It was still much closer than the walk last night had seemed.

"We should leave now," She spun around to find both Hatter and Moss enjoying tea.

"Before you ask 'what are you doing?'" Hatter readjusted the pot on the small stove, glancing at her through his fringe. "The answer is obvious."

“Obviously stupid,” she remarked, arms crossed. Moss giggled and she caught a glint of Madness in his eyes, not Mousy Moss. The journal lay upside down and open on the floor where it had fallen with her excited exit of the couch, and she snatched it up, smoothing the slightly bent pages.

“Don’t you think it best if we leave?” she tried again. The night had been full of dreams and her head felt crowded with thoughts she couldn’t understand, and they needed to get as far away from the queen as possible lest she have them executed on sight. Not that Alice could recall an execution ever happening but she was sure one was threatened more often than people were comfortable with.

The little boy took an infuriatingly long sip of his drink, slurping unnecessarily, and hopped from his chair.

“Why the rush, Alice?” he straightened out his shirt and vest and retrieved a neat white jacket from under the chair.

“The queen is coming for her heart,” Hatter smiled lazily from his place on the ground.

“She’s coming for the king’s heart,” Alice corrected without thinking. “And I want my memory back.” She remembered briefly the Madness, Marigold’s warning, and her stomach twisted like a butterfly had been trapped inside her.

“It is a long journey; we will have to travel with my friends,” Moss grinned and there was a wicked light in his depthless eyes that made Alice think he didn’t really mean “friends.” He checked a miniature version of Marigold’s pocket watch, shinier and less worried at, and then marched from the room without a backward glance.

Alice chased after him but glanced back to be sure Hatter wasn’t still sitting and sipping tea.

The path was damp with frost beneath their feet as they left the mansion and wound their way back toward the caravan. Alice watched the distant tree line closely, but there was no sign of soldiers or the queen emerging from its shadowy depths.

Moss insisted they wait in a cluster of brambles and trees while the caravan packed up and only when the wagon’s had begun to move did he scamper out of their hiding spot. Alice glanced skeptically at Hatter who merely shrugged.

No one glanced back as they approached the last wagons and Moss motioned them to climb inside. Alice had to give him a shove from behind;

his short legs unable to hold both the wagon and the ground at the same time. She clambered in after him and didn't have time to move out of the way when Hatter toppled head over boots on top of them both. His foot knocked over a precarious stack of small crates, which came crashing down with a loud noise.

"Oh—" Alice clamped a hand over Moss's mouth before he could follow the sound with something stupid. She didn't understand why they had to sneak into his "friends" caravan, but she wasn't about to get caught either way.

The wagon trundled on; no one pushed aside the front tarp to check what had caused all the noise in the back. Alice let out a breath and released the little boy.

"Be careful next time," she hissed at Hatter, extracting herself from the chaos and finding a clear spot to settle between a larger crate and a pile of sacks filled with something fragrant. He made a noncommittal grunt and remained stretched out on the floor. Moss perched himself on top of the large crate and tapped his feet in rhythm with the horses' steady gait as the whole wagon lurched into motion. A nervous excitement hummed in her body the further away she roamed from the Hunting Lodge, from Queen Delaney and her ever piercing gaze. The fits of rage that would throw everything into chaos and, if Marigold were correct, were becoming more and more frequent like the encroaching presence of unwelcome weeds in a garden.

Alice needed to get her memory back; she needed to stop the queen before her Madness bled into the rest of Wonderland. She needed to restore the king's heart so that he could retake his throne.

"Why was the king's heart stolen?" she turned through her journal. Moss tapped a double beat with his shoes, a faraway smile on his lips, and mimicked Hatter's grunt.

"Your heart is important to have, isn't it? Take it away or give it away and that person can make you do anything."

A shiver ran through her, what had the queen made *her* do when she had Alice's heart?

"But Queen Delaney doesn't have the king's heart? Or else she would be able to control him, which she certainly can't," she could feel the real question hovering just outside of her reach, like if she just turned the page in her journal, it would be there.

Moss hummed a teasing little tune.

“Who has it? Why? Did she lose it somehow?” she insisted. Staring down at a blank page, there were so many blank pages in her journal that needed to be filled.

“So many questions, Alice,” he crowed. “Things aren’t always as straightforward as an answer.”

“Things should be more straightforward,” she arched an eyebrow at him, but the annoyed look was wasted as he found it more amusing to stare cross-eyed at his nose.

“But they aren’t,” Hatter said from his position on the floor, one arm thrown over his face. “So how are you going to deal with that?”

Alice frowned, even though he couldn’t see her either, and didn’t respond. It felt like an obvious answer, but it helped very little in clearing her many more questions. She dug through the pockets of her dress and found what was left of her writing lead and contented herself with recording the few things she did know before her missing memory could steal them from her too. The letters lurched and wobbled across the page with the motion of the wagon and Moss continued to hum a tune that was familiar. Sunlight pressed down on the canvas cover above them and a warmth, strange for the late season, filled the air.

“ALICE…” the flowers whispered her name in a breeze that still clung to spring despite the cool white sun above her head.

“Alice,” the voice spoke again, but it wasn’t the flowers, they were faceless and pale as snow. She lifted her gaze from the trembling petals in her hands and saw them just a few paces away. The figure was hazy and indistinguishable. Hair fell around their shoulders and their clothes were loose enough that she wasn’t able to tell whether they were male or female. Alice opened her mouth, but no words escaped. There were no right ones for the desperate way she felt; the burning in her chest that at once wanted to reach for them and run away.

The figure began to turn; a shadowed partial profile with a ghost smile waiting to be given.

“Alice!”

Consciousness slammed back into her body with a jolt, and she couldn’t stop the cry from escaping her lungs. Hatter jumped back and barely avoided her panicked flailing.

The canvas above her was ablaze with yellow light from the sun directly at noon. She drew in several deep breaths—noting the wagon had stopped, the voices of the caravan filtered inside the cocoon of warmth; laughter, conversation, the whinny of horses, and stomp of booted feet moving to and from. The scent of cooking vegetables seasoned heavily with garlic and pepper wafted in on a light breeze. It was a cool wind, nothing like the one in her dream, and Alice breathed a sigh. She wished Kasei were there to tease her about dreaming again, to bother her till she wrote it down and could forget. It had felt for an instant that he had been there, a touch of his tail on her shoulder.

“Where is Moss?” she asked, sitting up to brush the wrinkles from her dress and the dream from her thoughts. She glanced up when there was no immediate reply to see Hatter sitting across from her, completely still and an oddly serious expression pursed his thin mouth. A nervous touch tapped her heart, and for a moment she could smell the white roses again, as though he had summoned them to hover around her shoulders like a shawl.

“What?” she demanded, the apprehension slipping into her tone despite herself.

“For a second you looked…” his head listed to one side so the hair moved off his face. A furrow formed between his brows and he scrutinized her a few seconds too long before finishing. “I thought I saw someone else when you opened your eyes.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Alice huffed. She waved a hand through the air to emphasize her statement and force the remnants of the dream to leave her alone. “I am me, and always have been even if my heart was missing.”

She got to her feet, turned her back to him, and rather indelicately clambered over a few boxes and bags to the back of the wagon.

I am me, I am me… she said to herself, imagining Moss as both Mousy and Mad. But she had her heart and would not become like that.

Her sock snagged on a protruding nail, and she found herself off balance and falling through the tarp flap. Pain flared across her shins as she banged them against the short gate meant to keep the cargo from sliding off the back of the wagon on her way out.

A firm grip caught her arm and she twisted mid-fall, facing sideways till she grabbed hold of her rescuer with her free hand. She was facing Hatter again, hanging out the back of the wagon with only his hand keeping her from toppling into the dirt.

“And who *is* Alice, I wonder,” he smiled down at her without showing teeth; his words almost lost to the general hubbub of the caravan. A knowing glint in his eyes. *You don’t even remember,* it seemed to say.

“Toadstools and crying pigs! What are you doing?!” the shouter rushed up behind Alice and snatched her out of the air and Hatter’s grip. “You trying to break your neck, silly girl?”

Alice tore her gaze from Hatter and brought it to the newcomer. Wide, dark brown eyes stared back at her from only a few inches away, and she realized that she was still not on solid ground, held aloft like one might sweep a girl off her feet.

“Oh! You can put me down now,” Alice wiggled free and dropped to the trampled grass; her mind struggling to catch up with the rest of her.

The woman standing before her reminded Alice of a tree; a solid build that branched out into a leafy canopy of wild black curls. A broad smile lit up her dark face and formed slight wrinkles that looked at home next to her eyes and lips.

“Another stowaway, hmm?” the woman asked, but she sounded amused instead of angry.

“It was very important that we not be discovered leaving the Lodge,” Alice managed a smile in return, somewhat weakly as Hatter’s words had wheedled a pin of uncertainty into her mind. Someone else in her eyes?

“Well, there are no hard feelings from me,” the woman laughed. “Friends of poor Moss are welcome to hitch a ride to wherever they need to go.”

“I got the impression Moss didn’t want to be caught here…” Curiosity got the better of her. “You don’t mind?”

“Moss is my nephew. A bit of a strange boy, not the wisest at life choices, and certainly makes most everyone else uncomfortable, but there’s nothing I won’t do for family.”

Alice glanced at the wagon, but Hatter had disappeared inside again.

“Thank you for your help, miss…?” she turned back to the woman. The complicated feelings lessened under the woman’s welcoming smile, and Alice thought Moss very lucky to have family like her.

The Wanderer’s laugh rang throughout the camp and her hand came to rest on Alice’s shoulder, steering her toward where a number of Folk congregated around a cooking fire.

“Such a polite little thing, aren’t you?” she motioned to the food. “My name is Sage, dear, grab a bite to eat now, and I’ll put you to work soon enough.”

Alice caught sight of Moss hovering close to the large cauldron and wove her way through the jostling Wanderers, bumping into him as someone shoved her in a way that didn’t feel accidental.

Never trust a Wanderer. The phrase rose in her fragmented memory, but she couldn’t place who had said that to her, but her mood dampened again slightly. She wished she understood the mistrust surrounding the Wandering Folk.

The little boy started and peered up at her with his disturbingly blank eyes.

“Alice,” he sighed and yawned at the same time.

“Hello, Moss,” she snagged the collar of his vest to keep him from slumping over into the pot and accepted two bowls of soup from the cook who squinted and pursed her lips at them. “Let’s go sit down.”

She guided them out of the fray, both bowls balanced in one hand while the other supported Moss, and found a spot in the shade of a colorfully painted wagon.

The food was delicious; potatoes and onions and mushrooms, different spices and garlic added to the broth and the taste filled her mouth and stomach and she sighed with appreciation. It had been since yesterday afternoon she’d had anything proper to eat. Her mind clearer and the worries always brought up by her dream chased off by the sureness of being awake.

“Do you really remember nothing as Mousy Moss?” she mused, not really expecting an answer.

“I think about light mostly,” the little boy sighed, a dribble of soup getting on the front of his shirt. “Blinking lights and steady lights. I think about all the warmness that fills everything.”

“Do you ever think about where your heart is?” she thought about asking if he would be normal again if he got it back.

He yawned and tried to put a spoonful of food in his mouth at the same time. She grimaced at the mess and took a moment to find a cloth and help him clean up. It took too long, and he did not answer her question, nodding off to sleep. She sighed, the sound a mirror of his, and finished her meal in silence.

There was no sign of Hatter as the sun steadily crept its way toward the horizon, and Sage made good on her word, and Alice found herself helping feed the horses and harness them when it came time to break camp. The Wanderers tolerated her, but she noticed the way they shifted their gaze away or outright stared when she got close. It was unsettling to think that perhaps they knew something she didn't, something she should know but couldn't remember.

Sage insisted on providing her a change of clothes as well, decrying the wreck of lace and silk which looked less and less white by the hour. Alice accepted the sky blue dress, which was slightly too short, barely reaching her knees, and, after some debate, put on the pair of striped leggings Sage had handed with the dress. The only spare boots the Wanderer could purloin were a bit large and had too many unnecessary buckles, which seemed to serve no actual purpose to keeping them on her feet. But she was glad not to be wearing heels anymore, even short ones, and the clothes was much warmer in the chill autumn winds.

Moss slept the afternoon away, first under a wagon then inside it as the caravan continued on its journey. Alice sat upfront with the driver and watched the landscape roll by in grassy hills mostly brown and ready for winter, but here and there she noticed patches of verdant green bursting out among the rest. Skinny vines that crawled up the already dead grass or snaked along the earth with pops of bright colored flowers along their spines.

The Woods was a constant presence at their side, a short distance from the road. Not the same forest the Hunting Lodge called home; that one had dwindled out to be replaced by a very different kind of place. The smudgy green shadows pulled her gaze again and again and a whisper tickled the back of her neck. She noted the slight change among the Wandering Folk too; they were less loud and purposefully ignoring the green presence. Another secret she should know but did not because *someone* had stolen that knowledge from her.

It was nearly sunset before she caught sight of Hatter again; he walked a few wagons ahead of hers, conversing at a Wanderer with wild gestures. The patchwork pattern of his jacket was a riot of color next to the man's relatively plain blue coat, and he tromped up dust with every step and the wave of his arms looked like it might pitch him over into the ditch along the roadside.

Who is Alice? The question returned to nag her, yet it was not only his words that set her nerves on edge, but the way he had said them. She could not claim to know him very well, having just met yesterday, but he didn't strike her as the type of person who took things seriously. The silent amusement always lurking in his shadowed face had been absent, the teasing gone from his voice. What bothered her most was the sense of the familiar in his eyes.

"If there's someone with funny eyes, it's you," Alice scowled at the back of his head, black and white hair sticking out every which way from underneath a hat he must have bargained from a Wanderer.

"I beg your pardon?" the older man driving the wagon glanced at her through a puff of pipe smoke.

"Oh, nothing, I was just thinking out loud," she choked back a cough and was grateful the wind blew most of the sweet-scented herbs away from her.

"Best to keep all the thinking in your head, little miss," he warned, a quick glance jumped to the Woods. "Thoughts have a way of running off to do their own thing when let loose."

Alice huffed a laugh. "They certainly do."

Moss poked his head through the window in the back of the wagon and, noting the foot of space between Alice and the driver, situated himself in it. Alice shifted closer to the edge of the seat to give him more room and leaned to get a good look at his face. The old man puffed nervously on his pipe.

"Mouse or Mad?" she asked. The little boy grinned.

"Always Mad, but not very sleepy right now," he replied, and Alice nodded. She had been waiting all afternoon for him to wake up properly and quickly flipped through her journal to the page she had been writing in not an hour ago. The question was important, she knew, though now it teetered around on the fringe of her consciousness, refusing to be of any help.

“I think we are close,” Moss said as she drew in a breath to speak. Her question faltered then came out in an annoyed rush.

“Where are we going exactly?”

“To find your heart.”

“I already have my heart; it’s my memory which is missing,” she said, making an effort to sound patient and wishing someone else in their little

band had any sense whatsoever. It was incredibly difficult to be the clever one when she couldn't keep a thought in her head for more than a few minutes.

"Yes, that too. But what is a heart if it can't remember what it is to love?" Moss pressed a hand to his chest and grinned his rabbit toothed smile.

"What is the use of remembering what to love if you don't have the heart to feel it?" Hatter trotted along next to their wagon and Alice suppressed a shiver at his sudden appearance. His words made the driver startle properly and the horses shook their manes when the man accidentally yanked on the reins. Hatter hopped onto the short step up to the front seat and hooked his arm around the back support of the bench. His hand was pressed between the wood and Alice's shoulders, and the earthy spiced smell of his strange tea tickled her nose.

"That wasn't very kind," she reprimanded, Moss's black eyes had gone terribly wide and she wasn't sure if it was the sunlight or tears glittering in their depths. She felt a rush of pity for the little boy and had half a mind to push Hatter off the wagon.

"Bad bargains have bad consequences that are no person's fault but the bargainer," the old man spoke up with the firm tone of an elder imparting the wisdom of the years on the younger, wayward generation. Alice did not miss the fear hidden in the words either. She was certain she'd made her fair share of bad bargains in her forgotten past; they were a weight in her chest from a heart only recently returned and in the cold absence in her mind. But what bargain had robbed her? What person had bargained the Madness into Wonderland and had the king's heart? Each question bled into the next in her thoughts till they were a string of daisies which could not be held together without the others. Perhaps she was imagining the connection.

The wagon jerked to a halt without warning, and Hatter was pitched off his perch into the dusty road. Alice clutched the side of her seat to keep from following; Moss's fingers clung to her arm and the boy giggled as his body was lurched forward then back again.

"Cursed Well, what is going on up there?" the wagon driver stood to peer around the cart that had stopped just as suddenly in front of them.

"That is our cue to leave very, very quickly," Hatter got back to his feet and offered up a hand to Alice. She had the distinct impression he had done something he shouldn't and the repercussions were about to catch up with

them—although in truth she was also on the run and whatever had stopped the caravan would have something to do with them both.

“Where? There’s nothing around to leave to!”

“The Woods,” Moss and Hatter spoke at the same time and the little boy gave her a sharp pinch on the arm to get her moving.

“Ouch!” she glared at him but clambered off the wagon. He only giggled and leapt after her, kicking up dirt and dust from the road. Hatter pointed to the tree line.

“Straight as a pin, no zigzagging or wobbling about. Now RUN!” he shouted and took off.

Alice remained rooted to the spot, gaping after her two companions. Fireflies glittered in the deep shadows of the Woods and the light of the setting sun barely stretched its washed-out orange claws beneath the green roof of trees. None of them were turning red or yellow like around the lodge.

Run, Alice. Kasei whispered in her mind in a voice that sounded almost like her own. Sage barreled around the wagon a second later and did not slow her momentum as she grabbed Alice and pushed her toward the Woods.

“Go, silly girl!”

A deck of four card soldiers came into view down the line of wagons;the Heart crest emblazoned on their jackets and light glinting off their short spears. Alice bolted.

Moss reached the Woods first despite being the shortest; his white mop of hair disappearing completely as he dashed past the first tree. The same happened to Hatter a moment later, diving headfirst over the underbrush. Even closer to the forest, able to make out the shadowed trunks of trees, there was no sign of them.

An arrow whipped passed her shoulder and tore into the grass to her right; it was followed by distant shouting that sounded like Queen Delaney.

Crossing the threshold from field to forest proved different to what she expected. A warm breeze rushed over her face and her feet were no longer on the ground, rather they were pointed towards the dark leafy branches while her head hit the forest floor, painful enough to create sparks behind her eyes.

“You can break your fall if you jump and roll.”

Little needles raced up her limbs as she pushed herself from a heap of vines to glare at Hatter.

“Maybe you could have added that to the instructions,” she exclaimed. The vines clung to her leggings with invisible thorns and it took some minutes of fussing and scowling and cursing to break free. The world soared above her head; the dying twilight sky provided only pockets of light here and there in the ceiling of dark green leaves. A warm night breeze wandered its way through the Woods with a deep, earthy scent on its back that spoke of growing things and the heat of almost summer. Somewhere in the distance she could hear the settling sounds of animals. There was no trace of the Caravan behind them or the card soldier’s pursuit; like they had stepped into another world all together.

Alice whirled from her inspection of the Woods to Hatter again who was pulling twigs from Moss’s hair—the result of the boy’s own tumble.

“What is going on?” she demanded. He raised an eyebrow as though to ask; *why should I know?* The look bordered on a challenge, like he expected her to be able to answer it. She turned her expectant eyes on Moss.

“Magic,” the little boy grinned.

“Madness,” she whispered, realization taking hold. It was there just like in the cells of the Lodge; the plants that grew too eagerly, that burst out of the earth like they had been gasping for life and only now managed to be free. She couldn’t see them well in the dim light, but the scent was in the air and the faint sigh of their voices disturbed by the breeze all around them. The incessant hum that sometimes underpinned the royal court.

“But…how did it become so strong?” her annoyance had quickly dissolved into a dreadful curiosity.

“A broken dam cannot hold back a river,” Hatter said and she thought it was probably the only helpful thing he’d ever contributed. “We should not linger on the edges; best to keep moving in a place like this.”

Moss didn’t bother to cover a loud yawn that showed all the way to the back of his throat.

“How far do we have to go?” he asked, rubbing his eyes. Worry tapped at Alice’s heart.

“You are the guide.”

Another yawn that nearly tipped him off the stump he was slouching atop. The frustration was beginning to return, and she opened her mouth again but Hatter interrupted.

“It’s not far to a safe place we can spend the night. About an hour’s walk so try to stay awake,” he warned. “Alice doesn’t look up to the job of carrying you and I have no idea how to care for a child.”

Alice frowned at him but chose not to argue. The darkness of the Woods was a creeping thing that left her thoughts more scattered than normal, or not normal in her case, and she didn’t trust herself to make logical choices. There was nothing to do but trust Hatter and follow him into the strange, watching presence of the Woods.

5

TEA AND SECRETS

The sharp grin flickered in the branches ahead, then disappeared to reappear seconds later in the black hollow of a tree trunk. Kasei's cobalt eyes glinted with amusement, and Alice was sure she felt the brush of his tail tickle her legs.

"Where are you going?" she ducked under a low hanging branch and searched for him to appear again.

"Come on, there's something to see just over here," he beckoned, his glowing feline shape slinking around gnarled roots. "This way, that way, where are you going?"

His voice thrummed in her head and outside of her head like the blinking yellow glow of fireflies that were the only source of light in the Wood. She tripped and the journal fell into the underbrush and she took a long moment digging through the foliage—a desperate panic rising in her chest the longer the memorandum was not a familiar weight in her hands.

"Quick, quick… you don't want it to get away," Kasei hissed, only it no longer sounded like him.

"Oh, keep it down you useless wisp," Hatter snatched up the journal and guided Alice back to the path she hadn't noticed straying from.

"That took less time than expected," Moss mused; eyes half closed.

"Indeed," Hatter agreed and hauled the boy up from his trousers to keep him from flopping to the ground.

"What are you talking about?" Alice stuffed the journal into the satchel Sage had offered with her new clothes and hugged the bag close. She

blinked several times to clear her head and there was no sign of Kasei, or the fireflies, or the bone-deep need to wander a little further away from the path—a little further beyond the dark pillars of trees.

“The Woods, the magic or Madness as you so aptly put it earlier,” he was walking again and she hastened to catch up, urging Moss along between them. “It has a fondness for little tricks and clever riddles meant to turn you in circles.”

Alice took in the forest around her with wide eyes. Thin spikes of moonlight broke through the close canopy above them and motes of purple and blue floated in its trail. The lush foliage that carpeted the ground seemed to be moving continuously in a breeze she didn’t always feel, and the multicolored leaves of vines and bushes and wide stalked flowers fanned a perfume of petrichor spring up from the ground. Here and there patches of blue or green glowing moon mushrooms formed rings around stones. She heard the scratch of scurrying creatures and the beat of feathered wings, but her eyes could never catch them and her ears told of whispered voices hidden somewhere in the glittering gloom.

This was the Madness that so scared Marigold. Alice had not realized how alive it was, how eagerly it sunk into the blank parts of her mind and beckoned her off the path to whatever exciting thing lurked just out of sight. A yellow light, the white flash of a rabbit's tail, or a beautiful song. None of the questions she wanted to ask Hatter could make it past the magic, and she remained silent trailing behind him. The only thought which did not slip away before she could focus on it was how Hatter appeared so calm, so at ease. The sensible part of her argued caution, but she felt more relieved that at least one of them was keeping it together.

The passage of time did not exist in the same way it did outside of the Woods, and Alice could only guess how long they’d been walking when a tall narrow building loomed up in front of them. The strange structure slouched in a small clearing surrounded by rings of gently glowing blue mushrooms. Alice struggled to recall what they were called; the magic of The Wood had begun to snatch away the names of objects she had never struggled to remember, and the constant vigilance had turned to tired desperation. There were no lights inside, and a dark soft growth had climbed to cover the whole structure a long, long time ago.

Creatures cooed in the shadows, and Moss’s quiet snoring mingled with the night sounds. He slept soundly on Hatter’s back, arms dangling around

the man’s neck and legs hooked around his waist, and Alice stood next to them with one hand firmly gripping the back of the boy’s vest. Partly to keep him from pitching backward unexpectedly, as he’d tried to do a few times already, and partly because an irrational part of her believed that if she let go of her companions they would disappear along with the last of her sanity.

“Here at last,” Hatter announced needlessly.

Alice pulled her gaze from the darkness and frowned up at the place.

“You can fix the Madness?” she asked around a yawn. He glanced down at her with that stupid laughter in his expression, she could see it even in the dark.

“I can fix its effects on you.”

“That’s what I said.”

“That’s not what you meant, fixing the madness and fixing you are two slightly different things.”

“*I* don’t need *fixing*, thank you,” she snapped. “Just my memory back, so stop arguing and let’s go inside…that thing.”

More and more names slipped her mind, and she couldn’t think of what the slouching structure was called. Soon she feared she’d forget her own name.

Her companion laughed; the sound echoed in the clearing like a thunderclap and Moss mumbled in his sleep—his lips quirked into a little smile. Alice stumbled to keep from yanking the boy when Hatter charged suddenly into the clearing, and not letting go as they entered the strange building.

More of the glowing plants had snuck inside as well, and by their light Alice helped settle Moss onto a chair while Hatter rummaged around the space in search of what she hoped was a way to put her mind in order. Or at least stop the Woods from stealing from what little she had left. She tried to examine their surroundings, but with the darkness outside and emptiness in her head, she could barely make out the room. Frustrations burned behind her eyes; time slipping away quicker and quicker and her helpless to stop it or even slow it down a bit. She hated the sense of foreboding that had stalked her since leaving the lodge.

“Ah-ha!” Something dropped onto her head from behind. She spun around, flailing her arms to bat Hatter away, and snatched it off again.

It was an ugly white and pink contraption with dangling pink ribbons. Disgust scrunched up her face.

“What is this?” she asked, the question half genuine as she couldn’t get the name off the tip of her tongue.

“To keep the Woods out of your head,” he said, “But if you don’t like that one you can pick something out yourself.”

He motioned to a tall array of similar items stacked along the wall, and she stepped over to examine them closer. Most were flashy and flamboyant but she dug around and found a blue band and tucked it over her hair—pushing back the chaos of blonde strands from her face.

Nothing happened. No rushed return of the names stolen by the Woods or a tingling shiver of recollection. She glanced at Hatter who wore a battered patchy top hat to match his jacket; his hair crushed down and sticking out all around the edges. Meeting her gaze, he raised a patient hand.

“When do I know if it worked?” she asked anyway.

“What are those?” he pointed to a cluster of moon mushrooms gathered at the base of the front door that blocked it from closing properly.

“Why are you always asking the most ridiculous…” Alice paused, stared at the mushrooms, and realized she *could* name them. Her gaze moved to other objects in the room; the cabinet with the hats stacked inside, windows opaque with dirt and forest growth, the ground a hard stone beneath her too big boots. There was only one other door in the small entryway, offset slightly from the one they had entered, and she could make out a dingy hallway beyond lit by sporadic clusters of blue light.

Hatter nodded with a self-satisfied smile.

“How does it work?” the drowsiness was replaced with a nagging curiosity and she examined the other hats closer.

“The rings,” he tapped the brim of his own hat which was studded with metal rings the size of coins. She reached up and felt the headband; the metal was cold to the touch. “Iron is a most effective deterrent in these situations.”

“Curious…” a smile settled on her face, more comfortable an expression than the worry she had been wearing. There was an echo of the familiar about his explanation, and she tried for a moment to remember where she had heard it before. In a story or as a warning given by a

concerned person perhaps. But the iron rings had not done anything to mend the void that was her past.

“There’s a kitchen somewhere,” Hatter commented, plopping a round bowler hat on Moss’s head. The little boy continued to snore, oblivious, with the hat tucked right down to his ears. “I’ll find firewood if you find us something to eat.”

Alice’s stomach replied before she could, grumbling loudly and prompting her to agree. He shot her an amused look, and she was glad the darkness hid the blush she could feel heating her face.

“You are sure the queen won’t find us here?” she couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to enter the Woods, with the way the Wandering Folk obviously feared it and the name stealing. But there was a certain determination when it came to Queen Delaney that Alice doubted a magical forest would stop.

“Are you sure?” the light of the moon mushrooms glowed up from the ground onto his face and the shadows made it nearly impossible for her to see his eyes. For an instant he was as unfamiliar as the Woods, and her heart lurched frantically inside her ribcage. She teetered on the edge of the fog in her mind; the shape of something close enough for her to reach out and take. But Hatter moved suddenly, diving to tear up a bouquet of moon mushrooms and thrust them into her hands. The memory scattered and she was left dizzy with the messy stalks getting dirt between her fingers.

“You are not very helpful,” she muttered, deciding it would be too much effort to fish out her journal and try to capture her thoughts. She didn’t really remember why the conversation had left her feeling so disgruntled.

Alice ventured further into the house. The smell of earth and moss, rotting wood and dampness permeated the close air. The narrow hallway brushed her shoulders with peeling wallpaper, and each step creaked like the keening of pond frogs. Alice held her mushrooms aloft and followed the faint aroma of spices that she recognized as Hatter’s tea blend, and came to a set of stairs that wound round and round up onto the roof.

Kitchen was not the best word to describe the room she entered. The walls were paneled glass, the Woods a black shadow beyond, and the floor was cracked tile crowded with an assortment of tables and chairs and a short, fat stove in the far corner. Pots and pans hung from metal bars just above her head and toppled in haphazard piles on the ground—tea cups on their saucers scattered among them. More uninvited foliage crept among

everything and whispered across her legs and tapped her shoulders. Maybe once a garden had taken up space at the far end of the room, but it had since claimed the whole place for itself.

Alice hesitated in the crooked doorway, blinking the strong scent of earth from her eyes and nose. The smell of Hatter's spiced tea filled her lungs to every corner and wrapped around her heart with a nagging sense of familiarity that touched the empty space in her mind—the void the remembering rings could not heal. Her dream looked nothing like the dark, wild place, yet there was *something* about it that made that emptiness feel bigger. It fluttered in the corner of her vision and whispered down her spine.

Who are you, Alice?

She spun and scanned the stairs; the voice had been Hatter's and the tone was an echo of what it had been back at the Wandering Folk's caravan, and her heart rabbited several beats.

"Stop it," she hissed through clenched teeth at the dream mingling in the air. "Leave me alone."

Her voice caught, and she pressed both hands to her eyes and scrubbed away the sudden wetness which trailed down her face and onto her lips with a taste of salt. The dream whispered to her again, and with sudden clarity she knew it was not really a dream; it was the answer. She wanted so desperately to see the face of the stranger in it; what was hidden on the other side of the glen of white roses. What secrets hid in the strange kitchen that smelled of rain and molasses that made her want to beg forgiveness.

Several long seconds passed before the dream dissipated and, despite how fast she tried to write it down, it slipped free of her mind till there was nothing left but an awful, hollow longing. Dirt smudged the pages of her journal and the pencil hovered over a half-written word she couldn't finish. Alone again, she forced herself to focus on the complaints of her stomach and foraged through the messy kitchen to where the stove squatted against one of the glass walls. Its short chimney pipe zigzagged up and into the shadows of the ceiling, and a whole community of spiders and mice had made it their home. Alice snatched up a broom to attack the chaos with fervor. It was unnaturally warm for the season, but a fire would banish the darker shadows in the room and in her heart.

"Making order out of nonsense, your greatest skill it seems," Hatter's cheery voice carried from the stairwell, and Alice paused only long enough to throw an irritated glance over her shoulder. He held an impressive pile of

wood in his arms and a bemused tilt to his head; Moss clung sleepily to his pant leg.

“I don’t believe anything could make sense out of this place,” she turned back to banishing the last valiant spider and straightened to survey her handiwork. The load of wood was dropped next to the stove and promptly scattered itself in a messy heap that bumped against her scuffed boots.

“Find anything worth eating?” Hatter wandered the dust and vine infested kitchen, peering into cupboards and lifting the lids of pots as though he expected to find a decent meal within their grimy confines. He picked up a tea pot and sniffed the spout with a grimace.

“I haven’t really looked yet,” she had needed to throw her feelings at the spiders and mice, only she wasn’t sure it had helped. That it would never help till she could remember *what* had happened to cause such feeling in the first place. She felt half a person, but how was she to explain that to him? Why did she want to explain it to him?

“What about…tea…?” Moss piped up from his spot slumped by the vase she’d tucked her moon mushrooms. A yawn punctuated his words so that Alice thought it sounded more like “wet boot flea,” but Hatter perked up immediately.

“That is an excellent idea, Sleepy Moss! Alice certainly could use a cup,” his strange eyes glinted in the blue light of the mushrooms.

“That is a terrible idea,” she interjected. “You can’t live on tea alone.”

And she was in no hurry to drink his particular blend of tea again after what happened last time—the dizziness and funny tingling in her blood.

Hatter gawked at her, for once seeming utterly speechless, and Mousy Moss opened his eyes to wide slits and peered with an offended air in her general direction. A small sense of satisfaction at shutting them both up quirked her lips into a grin she hid by busying herself trying to light a fire in the stove.

Wind rattled the many window panes and scraped the dark leafy branches of the Woods over the glass roof of the kitchen; the light patter of rain mingled with Moss’s soft snores. She ignored the sound of things being tossed around behind her, and the occasional shatter of porcelain dishes. Eventually the fire came to life and Hatter appeared beside her with a chipped bowl of wrinkled potatoes, shriveled carrots, and skinny white mushrooms. Alice set to work carving them into smaller pieces with a dull

knife while he fetched water to make a broth. There were strange reddish yellow leaves among the vegetables, but upon smelling the pungent aroma she quickly pushed them aside. They were reminiscent of Hatter's tea.

He brewed a pot anyways, and he and Moss enjoyed a cup each along with the weak, bland soup. The warmth of the food was more filling than the substance, but Alice was grateful to have anything to eat. She relaxed next to the stove, belly content even as her mind spun endlessly no matter how hard she tried to calm it.

"You still haven't really told us who we are going to meet," she finally said. Moss smiled vaguely at her, and she thought perhaps he'd ignore the question as was his habit.

"The Blue Caterpillar."

"Ah, that would be the person wouldn't it," Hatter chuckled, and Alice thought the sound was more forced than normal.

"Who is that?" she slid her gaze back to Moss. The name sounded familiar. "Why do they have my memory? How can they help with the Madness and finding the king's heart?"

"I am not good with answers," Moss yawned. "She knows all things and can cure your curiosity."

"I doubt Alice will ever be cured of that," Hatter teased. "Care for a cup?"

He offered her some of his tea in a clean cup.

"No, thank you," she said a little too firmly, eyeing him tersely. "Where are we going to find the Blue Caterpillar?"

Hatter answered while Moss slurped tea out of a cracked cup. "The Mushroom Marshes is where she was last said to be hiding. It's a decent place if one wants to study Madness."

A shiver of familiarity climbed up Alice's shoulders, and an odd certainty settled in her gut that they were going the right direction. To the Marshes. She rummaged through the satchel and began writing in her journal; every detail of the vague feeling and the marshes, the strong aroma of Hatter's tea. The thread of questions meant for Moss drifted free of her thoughts, try as she might to hold on to them, and she scribbled down other ideas in hopes of catching them again. Caterpillars and mushrooms, the Queen's angry eyes and missing hearts, white roses painted red like blood. Those were the kinds of flowers in her dream; why had someone tried to paint the queen's roses red? Were they trying to hide them from Alice?

“No one else knows about my dream…” she frowned down at the paper, orange in the firelight.

Moss murmured softly in his sleep, curled up on the dirty tiles before the warm stove using his jacket for a pillow. Hatter leaned against the leg of a nearby table, most of him covered in shadow, and she could only assume he slept also. Alice sighed and didn’t bother to look over any of what she’d written; the words and sketches formed frantically in her mind with nothing to catch hold of or illuminate. None of the chairs had seemed trustworthy, all three of them opting to sit on the floor for their meal, and she settled herself near Moss with one hand resting on his arm in case he decided to roll into the fire. Sleep came with the steady rhythm of rain on glass and the creeping scent of spring in the cold of autumn.

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO SHOUT!” Alice bolted upright, the loud shout cutting through her dream like a stone disturbing the clear surface of a pond. Her half-awake self didn’t recognize the voice right away, and a bleary glance around revealed the absence of her two companions.

Another shout carried up from somewhere below, and this time she knew it to be Moss, sounding agitated and very, very awake. Alice slouched back on her hands, unsure whether to be grateful at escaping another dream or annoyed that she wasn’t allowed more sleep. Already the memory of that clearing full of white roses was fading from consciousness, and she debated too long whether to try and write it down.

“What has that boy gotten into?” she said to no one in particular, though half of her expected Kasei to respond he had so long been her shadow. She moved to stand and noticed Hatter’s patchwork jacket had been laid across her shoulders, falling around her waist when she’d sat up. Most of the patches were shapeless and brightly colored, if somewhat faded, as though he’d torn up multiple other pieces of clothes just to make the jacket. A single black diamond in the center of the back was stitched with red and white thread, zigzagged messily, but when she straightened out the worn fabric the erratic lines formed a pattern; a flower, or a whole cluster of flowers. Or perhaps rabbit ears. A ruined well.

Recollection tickled the back of her neck, but it was no use trying to focus on the memory. She stood, bundling the jacket in her arms, and followed the sound of screaming out of the greenhouse kitchen.

Moss stomped around one of the downstairs rooms, waving his arms at the broken window and shouting at Hatter, and his pitch black eyes wide with Madness that swallowed the glimmer of morning sun. The target of his agitation slouched in a vine covered chair and frowned at the little boy; he shot up when Alice entered the room.

“What is all the racket?”

“Moss,” Hatter responded.

“TREACLE!” Moss shrieked.

“What?” Alice stared between the two, then marched over to the window at Moss’s insistent flapping.

The clearing that surrounded the old cottage looked different with sunlight pouring through the leafy trees. Every green leaf and blade of grass was edged in gold; moon mushrooms in clusters and circles had closed to skinny stalks at the touch of morning light. Strange shadows still skittered in the corner of her eyes, but they were less mysterious; birds and butterflies and rabbits in the verdant foliage that should have been well into autumn but held the fullness of summer in their colors. A slouching pile of stone heaped halfway between the cottage and the tree line drew her gaze. Her eyes lingered on the rocks, but the thought refused to coalesce from the mist of her stolen memory; it flickered away like the flash of a rabbit’s tail. She turned to face Moss, a furrow in her brow.

“I don’t understand what you’re asking me to look at,” and the more awake she felt the more restless her feet became. They needed to keep moving.

The little boy pushed out his bottom lip and marched a circle around the chair Hatter stood next to, hands shoved into the pockets of his wrinkled white jacket.

“Treacle in the tea. In the well,” he insisted and his words sent a spark of fear through her veins. She reached for the familiar touch of her journal but wasn’t sure what she meant to write in it. Treacle Wells were nonsense; nothing in her dream had to do with them. Perhaps it was Moss’s missing heart and not her past that had him so on edge. Hatter smirked when she glanced at him to make some sense of Moss’s outburst and mimicked the little boy’s petulant stomping. Alice pursed her lips.

“What about the well?” she tried to ask but Moss only sped up his pacing. His reply gibberish muttering.

“Make sure he doesn’t hurt himself,” she said to Hatter. “I am going to pack some food then we should keep going to the Marshes.”

“As you wish,” he continued to follow Moss in a circle, but his gaze flickered to her briefly with a teasing glint. The look reminded her of the previous night—how unaffected he had been by the Woods’ magic. She quickly made a note to ask him about it later then abandoned them to their shenanigans.

The house was different in the daylight as well, shining through cracks in the wood paneling and more windows that had lost their glass, and she took more than one wrong turn in her search for the kitchen stairway, stumbling upon the front entry. She did not wonder why the cottage had been abandoned; the forest obviously had a strong hold of it, but she wondered who had lived there before it was consumed. What family lost their home to the Madness?

“This is ridiculous, the house isn’t even that big,” she paused to gather her wits, combing her hair back with her fingers and repositioning the headband. Moss’s high voice carried from deep within the strange building, and she glanced toward the sound.

A shadow fell across the slash of sun that crawled through the front door, which was wedged ajar by a slumbering cluster of moon mushrooms. The lichen encrusted wood creaked on its rusted hinges as it inched inward, and Alice remained rooted to the floor. Kasei’s devilish grin split the dust motes floating in the disturbed air, and his eyes opened above it; the rest of his body materialized but was insubstantial.

Relief washed over her and she laughed. She had not realized how much she missed his presence, constantly appearing and disappearing and causing trouble.

“Kasei, you scared me.”

“Hurry, Alice, you’re going to be late,” his laugh was a mockery of hers. The door opened all the way and Queen Delaney stood, backlight in entrance.

The smile froze on Alice’s face. For a heartbeat they stared at each other. Alice almost believed it wasn’t the queen; a simple braid to keep her black curls out of her face and absent of a crown. Her expression mirrored Alice’s.

Alice turned and ran.

“Alice, stop—” the way she said her name tugged at an invisible string in Alice, coaxing her to listen, but the feeling vanished like mist into the empty part of her mind. She glanced over her shoulder, but the narrow, twisting halls immediately cut off her line of sight.

Hatter had convinced Moss to stand in the chair and drink a cup of tea when Alice burst into the room again.

“She’s found us! We need to leave now!”

Both of her companions stared open mouthed at her and did not move; a shout filled the second of silence between them. It dissolved into a raucous of many panicked voices, and Alice rushed to the window. A host of card soldiers were dancing and waving frantically at the edge of the clearing, struggling to free themselves from what appeared to be nothing. Looking closer Alice saw the flash of green vines lashing at their legs and arms and spears.

“How did she find us so fast?” Hatter mused, leaning casually out the broken window next to Alice.

“I don’t know…” she remembered Kasei’s grin and a chill touched her spine. *No, he would not betray me like that.*

No one else can even see him, so how could he?

“Maybe we should ask her,” Moss giggled from his precarious perch on the back of the chair. Alice caught herself before snapping at him and focused instead on escaping the immediate danger.

“Out the back,” she commanded and thankfully neither argued.

The back door turned out to be only a few turns down the hall, though she was almost certain there had been a wall there the night before. She and Hatter threw their weight against the thick weeds growing between the hinges, and they spilled out into the yard. The whole forest had come alive; a quick wind shot across her ankles and kicked up dirt and leaves. The tree branch bent down toward the ground with unsettling intent and the shouts of the soldier grew more urgent. Alice tried to block it out and jumped to avoid the grasp of a thorn studded bush.

“Which way Moss?!” The Woods looked the same in each direction, but the little boy, clutching a fistful of her skirt, pointed to a barely existing trail. The only evidence of its presence was the slightly trampled grass.

The queen appeared at the back door.

“Wait! Stop, you heathen!” she screamed, tearing at the vines that tried to grab her. Hatter let out a whoop of glee as they dashed into the Woods,

and Alice had the distinct impression the queen had been referring to him.

They ran till a stitch formed in her side and Moss's pace slowed little by little till he flopped to the ground and became Mousy again. There was no sound of pursuit.

"How much further till we reach the Marshes?" Alice gasped and leaned against the trunk of a tree, after checking it had no mind to come alive. Moss yawned and did not reply, of course. She sighed and glanced at Hatter. He shrugged.

"Soon enough, I suppose."

"Not soon enough," She said, Kasei's warning swirled through her thoughts and mingled with Marigold's constant fretting of being late. *Late for what?*

She wasn't sure why she'd always felt like she was running behind, or why Queen Delaney was so impatient. But knew it was important for her to find out, and sooner rather than later.

"Do you intend on keeping that?" Hatter motioned to the jacket in her hands. He'd dragged Moss off the path and settled the boy in a nest of fuzzy ferns. She stared down at his jacket, forgotten but tightly in her grip, and her mind slow to bring itself from her thoughts.

"Oh," she quickly handed the article of clothing to its rightful owner. He grinned and, with a flourish, pulled it on. Her face felt warm though it could have just been a result of their helter-skelter run through the forest, or the odd summer breeze. She busied herself scouting out a safe spot to sit instead of meeting his gaze.

It turned out to be more difficult than it should have been; he bent and twisted to remain in her peripheral vision, watching her intently.

The ground held the barest chill underneath a flutter of yellow leaves; they looked to be turning green again despite no longer being attached to their tree branch. She took out her memorandum and flipped through the pages. A bird whistled above, and a squirrel scampered up a tree trunk—its feet making clicking noises on the bark. Alice puffed an irritated sigh.

"What?" she shot Hatter her most sour expression. He was bowed almost on his head looking at her, hands in his jacket pockets and one leg slightly off the ground to keep balance. The iron rings in his top hat glinted dully in the late morning light, and she wondered how it stayed secure while upside down.

“You were about to ask something,” he said and let his already off-centered position topple him to the forest path where he lay on his side, propped up on his elbow.

“No, I wasn’t,” she said shortly, then added, “How would you know, anyways?”

But she could think of a multitude of questions that never truly left her mind even if her forgetfulness made it hard to catch them. She slid her gaze to Moss. The boy was fast asleep; a blanket of ferns covered his body so that only his mousy head was visible.

“Care for some tea?”

“Do you know what happened to Moss?” she asked, instead of saying no to a cup of tea for what had to be the hundredth time.

“Same as what happened to you, and the king. Have you always chased rabbits?”

She blinked at him and a reply started to part her lips, but she paused.

White rabbits.… the words whispered from the pages in her journal but refused to explain themselves. *White roses.*…

“No, I don’t think so,” she answered more slowly, straining to see through the fog in her memory. “Are you one of the Wandering Folk?”

He grinned at her with a flash of white teeth; a secret, knowing sort of grin and shifted to his back, staring up at the rustling treetops.

“No, I don’t think so,” he didn’t continue. Alice wanted to ask him another question, but there was an air of hesitation after his words, like he meant to say more. She watched a ladybug crawl over his hand, and a butterfly alight on the tip of his boot. His silence lingered on, and her mind struggled to hold onto the remnants of the conversation.

The stitch had faded in her side, no longer a sharp pain, and she glanced up the path with apprehension. There was no glimmer of card soldiers or flicker of royal red, and the Woods had settled as much as the subtle Madness allowed. Quietly alive and watchful, waiting, with bated breath as if it wanted to hear their conversation as well.

“We should keep moving,” she said, because the absence of their voices made her nervous. Hatter hummed a sound that was neither agreement or disagreement, and Moss snored loudly under his canopy of leaves. Alice pursed her lips but did not try to rouse them, instead turning to pour over her journal again and hope that, despite what everyone kept telling her, it wasn’t too late.

She remembered belatedly that she meant to ask Hatter about the Woods, and the question slipped away just as quickly as it had come.

6

DESOLATION OF DREAMS

“I just think there has to be a different way,” the argument was chasing itself in circles and Moss refused to listen. He sat in the middle of the path; his white trousers were irreparably ruined with dirt and bits of forest, but he didn’t seem to care.

“So, you already know how to reach the Marshes?” he retorted, a wild wave of his hands disturbed a pair of birds perched in the branches above them. The creatures’ large eyes goggled the intruders and their cries of protest grated like stone against stone as they took flight.

Several answers ran through her mind, hot in her lungs, but the practical side of her knew he was right.

“It will leave us vulnerable to the queen’s soldiers,” she said despite knowing it was pointless. Moss was in a particularly Mad mood since fleeing the abandon house; the strangeness of the Woods amplified it and spilled from every word and gesture. The Madness tingled over her own skin, and she’d found herself often straying from the path as they trekked, even with the iron rings in her headband, but the feeling of anxiety in her gut was not the magic. A deep chill twisted her stomach when she looked at the wide expanse of desert Moss intended to lead them through.

“Are you afraid of the Desolation?” Hatter asked, which was the first thing he decided to contribute to the conversation.

“That’s not what I said,” she heard the petulance in her own voice; there was no convincing Moss to change his mind and he was their guide afterall.

Hatter raised a skeptical eyebrow at her answer, a ghost smile hovering at the corner of his mouth. “This is the way we must go.”

Through the smooth trunks of trees, she could make out where the green grass stopped abruptly and turned to dry, cracked earth. A haze hovered over the horizon, shimmering with heat and the sky less blue above it, faded and tired. Desolate. Autumn was nowhere to be seen in this barren land. They really had traveled to a different world, and Alice could sense a responsibility in her being for stopping it. Why had Marigold’s plea affected her so much? She watched Moss giggle to himself, black eyes gleaming, and thought maybe Marigold hoped Alice could save her little brother too.

Moss clambered to his feet and trotted out of the Wood without a word; Hatter left off stuffing leaves into his pockets and sauntered after him. Alice remained completely still and watched, half expecting for them to crumble to dust and be blown away the moment the sun touched them. The cold dread crawled through the marrow of her bones and grew roots from her feet into the earth, keeping her frozen on the spot. Her heart had taken up a rapid beat that pounded her ribcage.

“Come on, Alice,” she breathed. “Pull yourself together.”

That is what it was; she felt untogether, pulled apart and unbalanced by the sight of the desert. The smell of flowers assaulted her nose like a wave against her face, and she stumbled frantically away as pale white petals drifted around her like falling rain. Her dream, which was not really a dream, reached out from the Woods and pulled at her, trying to drag her legs back into its strange depths and she broke out of the tree line to escape. The world tilted, and she wasn’t sure how she managed to keep her feet.

“Moss and I made a bet you wouldn’t follow,” Hatter said, cheery and oblivious. “I won by the way.”

“You cheated,” Moss protested and flung a stone at the man; it flicked off his chest with little impression.

“No, Alice is just predictable.”

Alice glared at them—envisioning knocking their heads together and perhaps shaking loose whatever they weren’t telling her. The suspicion grew every time Hatter opened his mouth. She decided against it and instead readjusted the satchel across her shoulder and tucked loose hair back behind her ears.

“Lead the way then, Moss,” she used every bit of authority she could muster and pretended not to notice the smirks.

The ground flaked beneath their feet, parched brown grass hissed in the warm breeze, and all around them rose and fell sharp juts of red rock like a giant had smashed its fist into the earth. Despite his insistence earlier, Moss continually tried to wander off, but Alice was grateful for the task of keeping him focused. Her gaze was drawn back toward the shrinking green band of the forest, half expecting to see blue slit eyes watching them from the purple shadows or see her dream crawling out after them.

The passage of time was marked by the slow yet steady curve of the sun and the growing hunger in her stomach. Moss checked his little pocket watch every few minutes, and Hatter whistled the same tune again and again, ignoring her when she asked him to stop. They trekked into the shadows of a large jagged wall of rock, and followed a discernible trail winding its way next to what could have been a streambed but was as parched as the rest of the land.

“Where were you when it happened?” he left off the incessant whistling. Alice glowered over her shoulder at him, hands firmly latched to the back of Moss’s waistcoat. The little boy clung to the side of a flat-topped boulder, and she was trying to stop him from breaking a bone.

“What are you talking about?” she demanded.

“The Jabberwocky?” it was another question though she wasn’t sure why.

Moss let out a trill of giggles.

“I remember,” he said, smugness evident in his tone.

“I don’t know what either of you are talking about,” she stumbled backward as the boy finally released the outcropping. “What is a Jabberwocky?”

“The Desolation, the Jabberwocky, my dear Alice,” Hatter watched, hands in trouser pockets, as Alice and Moss struggled to stand and not spill everything out of the satchel or let the boy climb again. “They are all connected and you of all people should know that.”

“Perhaps someone else is using that part of my brain, or have you forgotten that my memory’s been stolen?” she huffed. “What is the relevance of knowing this anyways?”

“It is very relevant, especially to keep it from happening again.”

Alice whipped around, dropping hold of Moss, who tumbled head over feet down a shallow slope. The heated words caught in her mouth and mingled with fear and desperation that had no meaning without her

forgotten past. He smiled a sly little smirk, and a glint of Madness glowed in his mismatched gaze. She was certain down to her bones that he knew something, and suddenly a whole new thought surfaced. What did *he* want that kept him on this quest? Why did she so strongly want to make sure he stayed?

The terrible feeling of untogetheress pulled at her edges, and she couldn't look away.

"Who—"

"I found a place for tea!" Moss's voice interrupted, snapping the thin thread of tension and Alice flinched. His head of messy white pigtails leaned around a boulder at the bottom of the slope, and his dusty face was stretched into a rabbit-toothed grin.

"Excellent!" Hatter's expression transformed in an instant at the mention of tea to match Moss's, playful and friendly, and he took the most direct route down the loose dirt hill. Alice opened her mouth then shut it.

She followed, taking a less hazardous route around the flat-topped boulder. An uneven path descended into the shallow valley and right up to a suspiciously rectangular cave opening. Inside was a very purposeful room; the sun poured in through two square openings on either side of the entrance and lit what could have once been a cozy home. A hearth sat empty in the far wall and a door led off to other rooms to her left; a table covered in dust and rock was situated in the middle of the space with four chairs around it like at any moment it expected the owners would return.

"Oh…" her eyes widened and she turned to look out at the rest of the ravine. What had appeared to be strange orange rock formations and skull-like caves were houses carved into the stone or blasted to nothing but a chimney and crumbled wall. Sun-bleached, desolate, but not decayed.

"There were a lot of villages here once…" she let the words slip from her lips as they rose in her mind.

"The Jabberwocky changed that; it's unlivable land now," Moss said, excitement bubbled in his voice that was at odds with the sobering words.

"Where did all the people go?" A keen sadness blanketed the whole valley and she wanted to leave quickly for an entirely different reason than before; her searching gaze landed on broken fences and ruined earthenware—lost homes. But it was not the same kind of abandoned as the cottage in the Woods. Where the cottage had been filled with the forest, the desolate houses were empty, hollow and dead. The absence of her memory

felt like a mountain in her mind and what had happened was a hidden blaze glowing around its edges. Hatter's question didn't seem so irrelevant.

"They all left to hide in the city, I think," Hatter commented, but she barely heard him.

I can fix this. The thought stepped to the forefront; her fingers tightened on the cloth strap of the satchel, and she turned from the dead village. Searching its barren landscape was not going to reveal what she needed, or who she was looking for.

Hatter stood by the hearth, attempting to get a fire going to brew tea, but she caught the movement of his head turning away from watching her. A sudden spark of remembering shot through her, and she dug out her journal, scrambling through the pages till she reached a mostly empty one. The marks of her pencil were jagged and uneven without a proper surface beneath the page, and her haste to get the thought down before it was gone.

Talk to Hatter. She enclosed the words in several quick circles. Her eyes jumped to the other words on the page and her breath froze.

Talk to Hatter.

Talk to Hatter.

Talk to Hatter… he knows you.

She stared at the page but could not remember when she'd written it; no date was marked in the corner of the page. Each entry grew more jagged and hasty—the lead smudged.

A loud crash broke her reverie, and she startled up to see Moss launching himself from the table. Two of the chairs clattered to the ground with him, and all thoughts of Hatter and his secrets vanished as she jumped to rescue the little boy. But a lingering unease settled permanently in her heart.

"You are impossible," Alice sighed, righting the chairs and soon the space was filled with the aroma of cozy spices and earthy sweetness. She felt obligated to be annoyed at Hatter for always making his strange blend, but her stomach grumbled that even a cup of tea would be preferable to starvation. And it was nice to be out of the sun; the skin on her bare arms and face was pink and warm to the touch. She wondered if a hat would have been a better pick instead of a headband but there was no going back now. Whatever Madness or magic was in the Desolation made the summer everlasting, ignoring the autumn Wonderland was meant to be transitioning into.

She settled Moss into a chair and took up the one next to him and rummaged through the satchel for something more to eat than just tea. There had been no time to grab anything from the house, and Hatter had warned against foraging too carelessly in the Woods, ignoring Alice when she pointed out he was continuously snatching at leaves to stuff his pockets. There was only a dim spread to pick through; a reddish brown mushroom the size of her hand, two wild carrots shaped like hooks, and a handful of hazelnuts. That was all she'd found not tainted with a glimmer of magic. Moss snatched a nut and popped it in his mouth before Alice could shuffle the meal out of his reach and begin rationing it out for all three of them.

The sun moved across the floor. Wind sighed through the vacant windows and stirred the dust into glittering shafts of light.

Moss munched contentedly on a carrot, sitting still for once while still being Mad, and Alice leaned across the table to catch his attention.

"So, Moss, can I ask you some questions?" her legs were restless to keep moving and her mind shifted just as untethered. She broke a chunk from the mushroom and nibbled the edge, pursing her lips at the sharp taste of earth.

"Can you?" he wobbled his chair on its uneven legs and waggled his pale eyebrows.

"Who is the Blue Caterpillar?" she asked instead of the other annoyed quips that slid across her tongue.

His high, maniacal laugh rose the hairs on the back of her neck. "The Blue Caterpillar is wisdom and memory. She searches out all of Wonderland's secrets and knows the Madness that lurks beneath everything."

"How? Why? What kind of secrets?" the curiosity burned in her fingers and onto the page of her journal; he had actually answered her and the questions poured from her lips. A nagging pulled at the back of her mind, at the dream with its unknown presence.

"They wouldn't be secrets if you knew," Hatter appeared at her shoulder, a dainty tea cup and saucer in each hand.

"I didn't ask for specifics," she accepted the offered drink but did not take a sip. "Besides, we'll learn soon enough when we get to the Marshes."

Hatter placed the other cup on the table for Moss, and the little boy watched them with a depthless glint in his heartless eyes. Steam from the tea curled up into his face, and a smile crept up its round edges. She took a

careful sip from her own cup to have somewhere else to look. The tea was hot, burning the tip of her tongue before she was able to taste any of the flavor; spiced floral and earthy sweet aroma that clogged her mouth and nose and all the way down to her stomach. A shiver slid up her arms and leg and she was reminded of why she'd avoided Hatter's tea. She hadn't meant to drink it either and blinked against a wave of dizziness, feeling as if she'd missed something important.

"Oh," she set the cup down and some of the tea sloshed over the rim. "What is in here?"

The taste was overwhelming and vaguely familiar like the way he would say things in a knowing sort of way or she would find white roses in her sleep.

"Secrets," he said, a laugh underneath the words. The two boys drank their tea, and Alice left hers to cool next to the dwindling pile of foraged dinner.

Secrets and Riddles. Stolen hearts, emptiness and Madness, the queen and red-painted roses in a garden overgrown with too green foliage. A pattern unfurled like a flower bud and at its center was her missing memory—the last puzzle piece. The final answer to the questions she hadn't yet thought to ask. It was growing bigger than just herself; the Desolation fit into it all too, and Moss's madness.

"Why me?"

"Who else?" she didn't realize she said it aloud till Moss answered as if he had been waiting for her to say it. He kicked at the extra chair and knocked it to the dirt floor. The crash startled Alice less than his question, expectation on his mousy face.

"I don't know," she said and heard the queen's voice in her mind growling that she would never know. Never understand.

Hatter leaned forward in his chair, across the dusty table, to catch her eye and grinned.

"Are you sure you don't want to finish your tea?" he asked.

Alice stared at him and felt the moment snap like slow thunder in a storm, shaken deep to her bones and gone despite trying to hold on. Thoughts washed out of her mind again, and she stifled a yawn.

"Oh, shut up, Hatter," she slouched back in her seat. Why had she thought he would say something useful?

He shrugged and took up the task of teaching Moss the annoying song he'd been whistling earlier. Indifference etched his frame yet a sharp edge traced the corners of his eyes, his smile was slightly too wide as if to hide what lurked behind it. She frowned down at the amber liquid; flecks of tea leaves visible at the bottom of her cup moved lazily as she tipped it to catch the fading daylight.

He always is *insisting I drink tea…* as though some great secret *did* infuse the liquid and would be made known only after she drank it. The tea seemed to amplify Moss's Madness, and Hatter's strangeness, and she couldn't decide if the 'side effects' would be worth whatever knowledge might reveal itself.

The tea tasted the same, even at room temperature, and she drained the whole cup in one gulp before she could change her mind. The initial dizziness slid through her with a shiver and she was left feeling normal again, trying to get the bits of tea leaves off her tongue in a vaguely polite way.

"All this fuss over nonsense," she sighed, setting down the cup, and pushed it away. With her memorandum open on the table in front of her, she settled back in the chair and tried to piece together what she could of her forgotten past.

"I CAN SEE IT CHASING YOU," Hatter sat on the ground, comfortably situated in the doorway.

"See what?" Alice asked. She no longer sat at the table, leaning back against the wall next to Hatter though she couldn't recall moving.

"The dream."

"You're crazy."

He laughed softly. The many colors of his patched-up jacket were strange inverted versions of themselves in the uncertain moonlight. His pale green eye glowed while the other looked as black as Moss's instead of dark purple peering across at her through the fringe of his two-toned hair. Shadows darkened the hollows of his narrow face and there was that look again, like from the caravan, and when they first entered the Woods. At the overgrown cottage and when he'd mentioned the Jabberwocky. The look that made her think perhaps he knew all her secrets but would not, or could not, tell her unless she figured out how to ask.

“Well, you are the one staring off into nothing and muttering to herself,” he said.

“I was thinking.”

“Mhmm,” something glinted in the light, but his hands moved too quickly for her to tell what he held. A tea cup perhaps, or a flower petal.

“More people should try it,” she added.

“Maybe we’re just doing it different then you.”

She tried to contemplate his answer, but her mind drifted toward sleep. Moss snored soundly somewhere in the shadows of the hollow house. Her mouth still tasted of spices and sweet molasses, and she could feel Hatter watching her.

“Goodnight, Alice,” he said, sounding almost sad.

She hesitated, sensing something more to his words. “Goodnight, Hatter.”

INTERLUDE

BEWARE

Magic shook the ground, rattling windows and nearly knocking her off her feet. The vial shattered in her hands, but she didn't notice the stab of broken crystal. Cracks formed in the dirt streets of the village, splitting garden sheds and barns with the sound of thunder. Houses and shops alike collapsed in on themselves as their foundations gave out and people ran, fleeing toward the Woods as another shockwave lashed out from the center of town.

The final wish had been used; the Jabberwocky's body writhed and pulsed and glowed as it crumbled from existence, yet the magic rumbled with displeasure. All that was green withered to brown; grass and crops, the orchard trees on the hills and mother's red roses had the life sucked from them just as the monster bled out from its wounds.

A red haze crawled beneath the carnage, magic from deep beneath the ground that carried a single-minded intent: punishment, corruption, Madness.

But she didn't notice any of it, didn't search the chaos for the boy or try to help any of the villagers streaming past her reach safety because there was her sister climbing out of a crater at the center of town. Dirty and scratched and holding the prince's hand with a triumphant smile on her lips, made red by a bit of blood. Her sister's gleaming eyes found her and narrowed as her grin stretched wider and wider.

"This will change everything, Alice," she had whispered in the predawn of a day that felt ages ago now. "Let me have the wish and we can finally be

free.”

She had done it; they were safe. Not just from the Jabberwocky, but from the fear of not enough food in the garden, of the sneers and condescending whispers of village people who didn’t care if the three sisters at the edge of town starved or not. Wearing clothes too patched up to be warm in winter and being left with the seconds everywhere they went. Most of all she had wanted to be free of the desperation which weighed in the eyes of both her sisters. And now, she had done it.

At what cost? *his voice whispered in her ear.* ***Nothing will ever grow here again.***

She turned to search for her eldest sister and saw that their cottage was gone; a jagged, ugly scar of broken earth where it once stood. Pain burned through her hand, and she stared down at the blood that flowed from her cut palm, dripping from her fingers onto the bone white roses that clung to the small section of fence which remained. An unexpected sorrow welled up inside her and spilled down her cheeks.

Tears are the strongest sort of Wish.

7

CHASING WHITE RABBITS

They came across more destroyed towns; a hot wind sent swirls of dust and dirt up into the air as mini tornados between the broken structures; the sky forever cloudless and pale blue and intent on scorching the already dry ground.

In the distance, Alice could make out a cloud of dust that wasn't the result of the wind, but the feet of soldiers. Hatter had spotted the Queen's entourage exiting the Woods in the predawn light, and the three quickly packed, not that there was any food left to pack, and rushed to stay ahead of them. Yet the dust cloud continued to gain and steadily herd them east instead of north like Moss had been taking them for the past few days, toward the green haze of the Woods on the opposite side of the Desolation.

The sun rested comfortable and yellow on the low horizon when Alice could finally differentiate the trees in detail, much taller than the other ones, in fact they were incredibly tall, towering higher than she cared to crane her neck to see the tops. The massive leafy canopies didn't start till well over halfway up the ridged, rain darkened bark. Oversized ferns crowded the undergrowth, touching the top of Moss's head with verdant leaves and red stems, crawling vines wrapped around the tree roots with black spots like eyes dotting their leaves.

Hatter led the way in to the Woods, Moss blinking sleepily behind him with a loose grip on the hem of his jacket. They disappeared as soon as they passed the shadowed threshold.

Alice glanced out at the Desolation again and found her gaze pulled to the center; the sun glinted off a distant settlement, and she suppressed a shiver. The strange dream hovered at her shoulders only this time it was different; never had she dreamed so clearly of her past, and yet the white roses were still there. That was all she could really remember about it unless she searched for the entry in her journal. A pang of sadness remained wedged in her heart.

Underneath the roof of massive trees, it was much darker than the early evening of the Desolation. She remembered, belatedly, Hatter's advice to jump and roll when crossing into the Woods and ended up with a face full of dirt again.

"Bother you, Hatter," She muttered. A scent of petrichor permeated the air and filled her lungs till it was almost suffocating, small spots of light dappled the overgrown path as fireflies winked from the shade of leaves. The silence that hung close over her skin made it feel wrong to speak, though she wanted to ask Hatter if he knew where they were meant to go, and Moss was obviously sleepwalking.

"If we stop, she'll catch us," he said softly, sensing the question without looking back.

"But it won't do much good if we walk further away from the Blue Caterpillar," she whispered. Moss stumbled and she caught hold of his hand to keep him steady.

"Won't do much good to be thrown back in jail either."

She sighed pointedly at him but decided against arguing. It was impossible to see how close the Queen was this side of the tree line and the question still nagged at her; how had they been found so quickly? Kasei's sly smile teased her memory.

What reason could he possibly have for leading her to us? Alice shook away her misgivings. *He has always tried to help me.*

They were sure to come across a safe hiding spot soon in such a large forest. Then she would be able to think better, to consult her journal while waiting for Moss the wake, and perhaps there would be an answer waiting there.

The path slowly rose then dipped down into a shallow hollow cut through by a wide burbling stream. Bursts of yellow flowers swayed their heavy tops down toward the water, nodding in the gentle breeze and from the light touch of butterflies which flashed iridescent purple wings. Alice

felt a smile lift her lips as she watched one of the butterflies rise into a twirling dance with a firefly. Hidden among the riverbank foliage were various plants she knew were edible; roots and small mushrooms, normal green leaves without the mark of Madness on them. The unease that had stalked them since returning to the Woods lifted slightly at the prospect of food.

“Maybe we can stop here—” the sound of snapping twigs cut her off. Her attention snapped to the top of the ridge; a card soldier stepped into view. The bright red heart insignia gleamed in the firefly glow on his armored chest plate and a spear was clutched in his gauntleted hand. The moment of peace she had felt standing in the glen vanished as two more soldiers moved up behind their comrade.

Hatter shot a mildly distressed look at her, and she tried to keep her panicked nerves from getting the better of her. How had they caught up so fast?

Neither moved. Moss yawned noisily.

“Halt, by order of the Queen of Hearts!” one of the men shouted, unnecessarily, Alice thought as they were standing well within normal talking distance. The loud noise felt dangerous in the silent, peaceful Woods. Drawing too much attention from something other than the three fugitives.

“Is she with you?” Hatter asked, bending casually to heft Moss over his shoulder. Alice gripped the boy’s arms to keep him from toppling off.

The soldier hesitated, sliding a glance at his fellow cards. “She is on her way as we speak.”

Alice felt a small measure of relief but not much. Hatter had a good hold of Moss and what Alice assumed was a very bad escape plan according to the glint of Madness in his eyes. She grabbed his arm as he started to move forward and hauled them back into the murky stream.

The water was deeper than it looked and a sharp cold closed over her head, rushing into her ears and up her nose with a jolt. The river pushed her around and forced her body quickly down its unknown path—smacking her into submerged roots and unseen stones worn smooth by the water. She managed a snatch of breath before being pressed back under and along, and with all her might she did not let go of Hatter, unable to do anything but pray he did not lose hold of Moss.

Her legs caught in something stringy and slick, then her arms and torso stuck and everything came to a halt. Not the water; it continued to rush against her and tried to crawl into her mouth and down to her burning lungs. She struggled to free her limbs, but the more she thrashed the stucker she became till her lungs could no longer take it. She gasped in a breath and realized they were no longer underwater.

Slowly, they rose into the air. She still had her arm linked through Hatter's and as her water-logged mind began to receive enough oxygen. She became aware they were pressed together inside a large net. For one panicked second, she didn't see Moss, but then his leg kicked out and smacked her in the side of the head—her worry replaced with annoyance and no small measure of relief. She expected to be hauled up onto land, but the net continued to rise higher and higher and up toward the black leafy canopy of the tree tops. The ground below was unfamiliar and far away from the card soldiers; lit by glowing dragonflies which trailed their violet light in quick swirling patterns across the deceptively calm surface of the stream. Twisting to see where they were headed only afforded her another face full of Moss's boot.

"Are you alive?" Hatter's voice was right behind her head, sounding waterlogged and on the edge of laughter.

"Miraculously," she coughed and fired burned her nose.

"Well, I would like to commend you on your ingenious escape plan," he was teasing, which she thought was incredibly unfair.

"Nearly drowning wasn't the idea," she retorted. "I meant to cross the stream not fall into it."

He laughed, and she could feel the vibration of it through her back, which was pressed to his chest. Or rather his chest was pressed to her back; she had somehow ended up on the bottom of the pile with Moss snoring on top and Hatter sandwiched between.

"Clever as always, Alice," his words nudged at the empty space in her memory, conjuring up white roses and a depthless dark well. But she couldn't hold onto the thought, and it slipped away like the rushing stream.

Her response was interrupted by their rope prison jerking to a halt. The sun must have finally gone down in the rest of Wonderland; the Woods around them were dark enough that even the shadows were hard to see. The dragonflies winked and flashed like stars in a midnight sky underneath

them, and Alice had the dizzying sensation of being suspended in the center of a void—nothing above but darkness and nothing below but stars.

“I told you it weren’t fish,” a whispered voice floated in the dark.

“What is it?” another voice.

“Cut the rope, can’t be nothing but trouble.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Alice tried to crane her neck around, avoiding Moss’s foot, and searched for the pair of disembodied voices. “Excuse me?”

Startled silence.

“Um, please, we need help,” it was beginning to get hard to breath, the rope chafing too close to her throat. “We would be grateful if you released us from the net. It’s not very comfortable.”

“Preferably not over the rather distant ground,” Hatter added. Alice jabbed an elbow into his stomach to shut him up, though his point had been valid.

The voices hissed inaudibly to each other for a long second before one of them called out:

“Did the queen send you?”

“No, we are trying to hide from the queen, actually.”

More deliberating whispers and finally the net swung into motion again. Up further till she was able to make out the faint glimmer of moon mushrooms hidden behind covered lanterns. Their captors were huddled shadows as they reached out to pull the ropes closer, and Alice felt a wooden platform beneath her instead of empty space. Within a second, they were all free of each other, the net falling loose.

“You says you’re hiding from the queen?”

Alice sat up, rubbing her sore stomach and arms, to face the speaker that was nothing more than a dark blob several feet away.

“Yes...” she hesitated, uncertain whether to trust these strangers with the truth. Moss mumbled just audibly in his sleep.

“Looking for the Blue Caterpillar, must return the king’s heart.”

“Told you it was trouble!” the second voice moaned. “She come back to do it proper now.”

“Do what?” Alice demanded, abandoning her effort to ring water from her dress. “Do you know where the king’s heart is?”

Her hand reached for her memorandum out of habit only to find nothing; no satchel, no journal, no notes and sketches or recordings of her

strange dreams. The only way she had of remembering had been swept away in the river. Ice shot through her veins with needle intensity that had nothing to do with her soaking wet clothes. The air was suddenly too thin to breathe so high up. How could she have let it slip loose? She lurched into motion, snatching at the rope net blindly, but the satchel had not been caught along with them and her hands found Hatter's sleeve in the near dark. Her fingers clutched the fabric till she thought it might tear one of its many seams.

"Hatter, my journal! Do you have it?!" a catch in her voice pitched her words close to hysteria. Desperate. Imagining her mind gently settling back into the Alice she had been at the Hunting Lodge—absent and silly and oblivious. She hadn't realized how much she had changed from that girl from only a few days ago.

"Already forgetting things?" he teased, noisily dumping water from his boots, but there was an undertone that she almost missed. She shoved him hard, half hoping he toppled off the wooden platform.

A bluish green glow broke the darkness, and she lifted a hand to block the sudden illumination, startled momentarily from her anger at Hatter. Two figures huddled watching them, luminous eyes staring from beneath their hoods like full moons. One held the lantern while the other was armed with a strange silver hook attached to a staff.

"By the Well, she sounded just like her," the lantern bearer whispered and angled the light to shine more fully on Alice's face.

"Don't she looks a bit like her?" the other demanded, hefting the hooked spear in a menacing way.

"What are you talking about?!" Alice snapped. Her clothes clung uncomfortably to her body, and the lantern swung to bump her nose carelessly. Any patience vanished with her journal, and she slapped the lantern away.

The two people shied back.

"What I think she means is we would appreciate a meal and some dry clothes," Hatter interrupted and replaced his boots before starting to rise. He stopped upon realizing their captors were incredibly short, he was level with them while still kneeling. A grin sparked across his face, that silent laughter humming around him.

"We have to bring you to the boss," the spear bearer said.

The mention of food summoned a grumble from both Alice and Moss's stomachs. She could feel the thoughts floating through her mind and out of reach, the lost journal and reason for her anger and panic. She clutched at them, but could not hold them. The fog creeping more and more over her thoughts till all that was left was hunger and an ache inside herself that she couldn't explain.

"Excellent," Hatter said, overly loud as though he wanted to crowd out the rest of her memory.

Moss remained sprawled on the wooden ground looking by all appearance dead, but a wet snore, much louder than should have been possible from such a small boy, dispelled her worry. Between her and Hatter, Moss half walked and was half dragged after their escort.

A second lantern was uncovered and illuminated the smooth boards of a narrow walkway, stretched between branches and trees with only sagging ropes to form a barrier against the endless black space beyond. They walked for several minutes, and Alice wished she had thought to empty the water from her own boots, her feet squelched in the wet leather. With each step, her mind spun in circles; journals and hearts and blue eyes that weren't real. Her dream wafted sweet floral scents around her head, teasing snatches of memory just out of reach and impossible to catch without a way to write them down, and her own heart skipped a frantic beat in her ears. Hatter's body shifted toward her, but he did not turn his head or speak though she felt he meant to, words weighing the way his shoulders hunched slightly.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She didn't know what to ask him either. Only that he would not speak unless she asked first.

Another set of lanterns appeared ahead of them as they rounded a turn; the light framed a low doorway that was guarded by a single person dressed in a cloak and short as the other two. The strange little creatures barely reached her waist. Closer, Alice was able to make out the intricate carving on the door frame; curling golden vines studded with pearlescent stones shaped like flowers she imagined were roses, though it was hard to tell what was real and what was merely her dream come to haunt her perception.

Their three captors consulted in lowered voices, motioning back at them with urgency.

"I lost my tea pot," Hatter leaned across Moss to whisper to her. Alice stared at him confused and mildly annoyed, which he probably couldn't see in the dim light.

“I don’t think that’s very important right now,” she whispered back. Not that she could say what was important. Her journal, but there would be no recovering it.

“Of course, it is,” he pretended to be offended, but she could hear lightness in his voice. “How else am I to make tea at all the wrong times?”

She stifled a laugh; for once, his teasing eased the tension in her. It settled her scattered thoughts to have something she could understand to fuss at him about.

“You’re an idiot,” she replied, then added as a breeze poked at her drenched clothes. “But a hot cup of tea would be nice right now.”

He grinned and shrugged, straightening again as their captors finished their discussion. Her thoughts were more settled and she could remember at least one important thing.

“Alright, giant folk,” the staff holder declared. “You are to pass through so you can meet the boss. But don’t mistake this as a cordial visit.”

They said the word ‘cordial’ like it was one they’d just learned the meaning of and thought it sounded important.

“We don’t really have time for meeting people,” Alice said. “Cordially or otherwise, we have to find the Blue Caterpillar.”

The longer it took the quicker she would forget.

The little people stamped their feet, and their eyes turned to half-moons in agitation.

“Usually, I’m the one saying silly things,” Hatter interjected. “Or Moss.”

“No more talking!” Staff holder shouted. Alice thought about saying something but pressed her lips shut. She would be able to think straighter once she wasn’t constantly tugging at her wet clothes, trying to make it stop chafing.

The door opened without any of the three creatures touching it, and for a moment Alice didn’t understand what she saw on the other side. Three bedraggled and soaking wet figures; one tall and lanky, like a skeleton in patchwork clothes, a short tan boy in a suit that was no longer white, and a young girl whose dark yellow hair was tangled around a blue headband fixed with iron rings. Her eyes stared straight into Alice with vague clarity, searching for answers she didn’t know the questions for.

It was a mirror.

Is that what I look like? Several different conversations and remarks made about her appearance rose to the front of her mind, and she felt the recognition touch lightly on her nose, her high cheekbones, and mouth slanted into a frown.

“I do look like her…” But there was something lurking in the image which wasn’t quite right, wasn’t the same and she found her hands searching for her journal.

“ALICE!” The shout made her jump and drop her hold on Moss. She blinked away the white rose petals and molasses scent, and was faced with the dark forest again and the strange captors watching her. The reflections wavered in the mirror behind them. For a moment, there had been a brightly lit clearing in the glass, covered in white roses. She wasn’t sure who had said her name.

“Ladies first,” Hatter motioned to the mirror with a flourish, made awkward by Moss slumped against his side. She stared blankly at him, uncertain what he meant and untethered by the dream. He sighed, stepped forward, and shoved Moss into the glass.

The little boy slipped through with a ripple of light and barely a sound and the surface settled back into place a moment later. Not a single crack or mark on it.

Alice rushed to stand next to Hatter.

“How did you do that?” she breathed, alarmed and fascinated at the same time. Reaching a hand to touch the cool surface her reflection copied the move

“Magic,” he chuckled and gave her a gentle nudge between the shoulders and into the mirror.

The glass melted around her, thick as honey, and purple stars sparked in her vision as she exited on the other side. She nearly tripped over Moss who had remained asleep and lay sprawled on the ground.

It was much brighter this side of the looking glass.

Alice stepped to the edge of a balcony of sorts overlooking the hollow center of the giant tree they stood inside. Rope and wood walkways stretched like birthday streamers across the expanse, aglow with firefly filled lamps that also lined the winding paths carved into the side of the tree. Platforms attached to odd rope contraptions ferried people and supplies from floor to floor and green plants spilled from every ledge, every corner, and every crack in the wood. Vines and flowers and bushes that towered

over them as they were ushered along the walkway and onto one of the long, suspended bridges.

“By the Well…” Hatter whistled in approval.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” Alice agreed, her worry nearly forgotten. From the middle of the bridge, she peered down the various levels like the rings on a tree to what could only be a marketplace, lit by green hued moon mushrooms the size of a person. Above, several more walkways listed in the still air beneath the tightly entwined canopy of leaves that created a roof of the whole city. A single wooden structure was suspended at the center of the hollow, just below the canopy, and a moving platform was the only visible route to it.

The staff bearer corralled them toward the box, past other moon-eyed folk who gawked and shied away at the same time. They no longer wore the hoods, and Alice tried not to stare at their pale blue or green tinted skin and pointed ears; none of the creatures had hair and their clothing was decorated with feathers of every kind and color. She had no idea creatures like them existed in Wonderland. Were they a result of the Madness?

Familiarity nagged at the back of her mind, but no answers rose to explain the feeling. There was no journal to consult or to write down what she could to try and remember, and the dread crept into her bones again, chasing away the momentary marvel of the spectacular tree city.

“Eggs!” Moss’s sudden shriek scared the small group, breaking Alice from her thoughts. He jerked free, very awake, and was careening along the path before anyone could react. Hatter stared after him with a little white jacket in his hand, but no little boy inside the jacket.

“Stop!” their captors shouted after the momentary shock, and all three abandoned Hatter and Alice to give chase.

“I have half a mind to leave him,” Alice sighed. Of all the times he chose to be Mad.

“He is our guide to the Blue Caterpillar,” Hatter noted, folding Moss’s jacket over the railing. “And he is very amusing.”

Alice took off; the bridge swayed under her feet, but she reached the other side before she could think too much about it. Moss leapt deftly from lamp post to lamp post, whistling out the melody Hatter had taught him like a bird. He snatched a vine and was suddenly several floors down, and his pursuers crowded the railing, shouting after him.

“This way, Alice,” Hatter grabbed her hand and made for a stairwell, carved into the wood of a smaller tree. It wound round and round till she felt dizzy. They rushed past more of the moon-eyed folk, who flattened themselves against the wall to avoid being bowled over, and burst from a curtain of bright orange vines into the Market square.

“Do you see him?” she asked, breathless.

“He is, unfortunately, the exact same height as these little folk,” Hatter replied, sounding more amused by the fact than Alice felt necessary. She and Hatter were the odd ones out, towering above the people around them and a shout from their captors a few rings up drew the attention of more guards.

Alice took the lead, bolting toward a flash of white hair. She knocked into a lady carrying a basket and warm bread rolls toppled with their baker onto the wood and dirt floor.

“Sorry!” she didn’t stop and the calls after her sounded less than complimentary.

Hatter pulled her to a halt in front of one of the large glowing moon mushrooms; the light pulsed beneath the cap and shone through the whole fungi. Moss clung to the edge of the cap with both fists, swinging back and forth, and his maniacal laughter made her skin crawl. A ring of moon-eyed folk surrounded the mushroom blinking wide, luminous eyes and chattered agitated in a language she didn’t understand.

“What are you doing?!” she demanded. “We need to get out of here.”

“HAHAHAH!”

“Stop it!”

“HEHEHEH!”

“Maybe we should join him?” Hatter interjected.

“Not helpful, Hatter,” Alice tried to grab Moss by the leg before remembering she was still holding Hatter’s hand. His fingers, laced through hers, were cold and did not release their hold when she tugged. Snagging Moss’s pant leg with her free hand she turned to snap at Hatter, panic coursed through her veins that she couldn’t put a proper source to because it was something written in her journal, something hidden in her past. Something was coming. The magic drawn to the chaos.

The green light of the mushroom glinted in the mismatched colors of his eyes that purposefully looked *at her*. Ignoring the pandemonium swarming

around them, his mouth turned down in a frown that sealed the angry outburst in her lungs before she could even form the words in her mind.

“Everyone knows not to chase White Rabbits,” he whispered, yet she could hear it as though he had spoken right into her ear. A wrongness burned through her chest, under her skin and into her hands; his voice, but not his words. She had been told that by someone else before and, deep down, she knew she had not listened.

The guards arrived. Alice tripped over her own feet as the dream rushed toward the untogetherness that rumbled inside her and collapsed onto a bed of ferns, head thudding against the hard ground.

Her vision swam doubles of Moss above her head. The air refused to get back in her lungs, knocked out by the fall nearly as sharp as Hatter’s words and rose petals floated around her head. Someone stepped on her hair and another small foot kicked her arms, which were flopped out on either side of her body. The Little Folk clambered around her, but she couldn’t sit up.

The dream pressed her body down and darkness slowly engulfed her. She saw Hatter heave Moss from the mushroom cap, and they both stumbled out of sight among the agitated mass. Unconsciousness dragged her mind into nothingness.

8

LOOKING GLASS

Alice had no memory of her life before. Before the Hunting Lodge, before she got her heart back, and the Madness took hold of the royal court. Before discovering the queen had stolen the king's heart. She could not think of a life from before the dream that cloaked her mind; a mist too thick to see what strange shapes shifted just out of sight.

Who are you, Alice?

How could she know anything, least of all that, when all that she could struggle to remember was the past handful of days and not the whole lifetime that came before?

Pain woke her and she jerked upright into the wooden floor boards with a gasp.

"Ow!" she blinked away the sparks in her vision and rolled onto her back. The gentle sound of rain filtered into the small room, and a few droplets slipped past the leafy roof to plop onto the floor with a steady rhythm. But the air smelled warm as summer; heady with the scent of roses and the subtle hum of insects dancing in golden light that spilled onto the verdant green clearing. The dream hung around her shoulders, soft but heavy, and she squeezed her eyes shut again.

"Stop it," she hissed, voice hoarse, and she shook her head violently to dislodge the vision. The closer she came to the Mushroom Marshes, to finding the Blue Caterpillar, the stronger the dream grew.

Cool air tickled the back of her neck and raced along her arms. The dankness of the room chased away her dream, and the flutter of white petals

turned back to the flash of rain drops in the dim grey light.

“Alice, Alice…” Kasei’s voice appeared before the rest of him. Two flame-blue eyes opened above the curve of a large branch that cut the room in half, followed by his black feline body and striped tail winding round the wood more times than should have been possible. His smile was last to appear, arched like a crescent moon. “It seems I always find you lost.”

“Kasei!” her stomach dropped at the sight of him, dread curled in her chest. “How did you find me?”

“Is that really the first question you wish to ask me?”

It wasn’t, but her head felt stuffed full of thorny flowers, glittering tears, and grinning teeth that swirled around the dark well in the center of her mind where her memory should have been. He had done something that made her worried by his sudden appearance, but she couldn’t remember what.

“Yes,” she glowered at him with forced confidence. “What… what happened?”

Kasei did not answer right away, as though he expected her to change her mind and ask something else. But already her focus was slipping, and it took all her will to keep the blankness from taking over. She pushed herself up and searched the dark corners for someone, only just managing to picture his rumpled jacket and crazy hair. Hatter and Moss were nowhere to be seen.

“Madness,” Kasei finally said and stretched a paw to dig long claws into the soft bark. Deep, jagged marks glared pale from beneath the dark wood surface. “Have you not been listening?”

“I am listening,” she snapped. “What do you think I’m going to the Blue Caterpillar for? Once I get my memory back and return the king’s heart that will all be fixed.”

Doubt whispered in the back of her mind. Her hands moved to where the lost satchel should have been with her journal.

“Still not going the right way. You can’t play croquet without a mallet and ball or chess without a queen and her pawns.”

“Bother you and your riddles, Kasei,” his words worked into her chest, but she knew she would not remember them. Useless brain and useless heart.

“I don’t understand,” she didn’t bother to keep the frustration from her voice. “Why did the queen steal my heart and then give it back? Why did

she steal the king's and then lose it?"

Kasei laughed a low rumble that sounded like a purr. "Wrong again."

Heat rose under her skin and into her face.

"Just answer the question!"

"Just ask the right question, Alice."

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out; the words choked in her throat. Rain water dropped rapidly onto the wooden floor and filled the thick silence. The chill pushed the edge off her anger as the thoughts struggled to gain a hold in her mind and not disappear. Would the rest of her disappear soon?

"You are almost as bad as Hatter," she huffed, blinking against the blurriness in her vision.

"No one can be that bad," he whispered, suddenly wrapped around her shoulders. His whiskers tickled her cheek and the warmth of his body ebbed down her limbs, and she noticed for the first time that it felt like autumn and not spring in the little room. A dread sunk into her stomach that had no explanation, and she craned her neck to look at the cat's face.

"I need to find him," she said, all other thoughts vanished like smoke to be replaced with a singular feeling of desperation. "Please, help me."

"Always so impatient," he sighed. "It must run in the family."

"What do you know about my family?" she meant for the words to be condescending, fear masquerading as anger, but her question was pleading. She clambered shakily to her feet; Kasei vanished from her shoulders.

He materialized directly in front of her face.

"She wants what you have forgotten. You might not like what happens if you give it to her."

Alice hesitated. "She wants the king's heart."

He grinned a sympathetic sort of smile. "She wants your dream."

Slowly, then swiftly, he disappeared from tail to eyes and his grin last to vanish like a waning gibbous moon.

She stared at the empty place he had been and a new doubt wormed its way into her mind. What did the queen know of her dream? Her hand moved to where the satchel no longer rested at her side—the journal lost forever.

A trap door flung open and she jerked back to avoid being smacked in the knees.

“There you are!” Hatter’s eccentric hair appeared; a grinning face framed by the fringe. “Moss owes me a hat; he said the Little Folk had thrown you off the top of the trees.”

“What happened to your other hat?” she asked without thinking, then added. “Never mind, we need to get out of here.”

He allowed her to usher him back down the ladder to the storage room below. The space was crammed full of wooden crates, but she didn’t stop to examine them, making straight for the door on the far wall, which led to a winding staircase. She raked her brain for an explanation, struggling to remember where they were and how she’d ended up there. At the bottom of the stairs, they spilled out onto a balcony overlooking the entirety of the tree village.

Alice lurched away from the narrow railing; they were at the very top of the Little Folks’ tree village with a view through the spiderweb of swinging bridges and glittering firefly lamps all the way to the green glowing market at the base.

“Looks like we have company,” Hatter leaned over the railing, the thin wood bowing under his weight.

“Where is Moss?” She scanned the small balcony, but there was no sign of the little boy. Worry needled at her already unsettled mind.

“Finding us a way out,” he said dismissively and straightened to face her. “What are you hoping to find when you reach the Marshes?”

Her heart hopped too quickly several beats; tiny needles of anxiety shot under her skin and she remembered what she’d meant to ask Kasei. How did he know what the queen wanted?

“What are you talking about?” she frowned to mask the discomfort his words caused. “The king’s heart, or I mean, my memory and then the king’s heart…”

“Everyone knows not to follow white rabbits,” he said, as if it explained everything.

“I can’t have two people talking in riddles and Kasei has already claimed that role. So, either say something that makes sense or be quiet and let’s find Moss,” annoyance laced her tone and she pushed past him in search of a different way off the balcony. The absence of her journal was like a burn on her palms that refused to properly heal, unable to catch her wandering thoughts.

“The Little Folk were right,” he caught her arm and brought them both to stand by a wheel and rope contraption; it reminded Alice of a well with a bucket for lowering into the dark water. He grabbed the lever attached to the wheel and cranked it down. The whole balcony began to swiftly descend, and she grabbed his arm in turn to keep her balance. It wasn’t that she was particularly afraid of heights, only of the questionable strength of the creaking wooden platform as it hung in empty space. She was afraid of falling.

“Right about what?” she muttered, resisting the urge to glance over the edge and risk making herself dizzier than all the questions and movement already had.

“You *do* look quite a lot like her when you’re annoyed,” he chuckled.

She glowered at the frayed lapels of his patchwork jacket. Somewhere, at the bottom of a deceptively calm stream, was the name of the person he meant, tucked away in Alice’s journal but not in her mind and all she could conjure was her own reflection in the Little Folk’s strange mirror they had passed through to enter the tree village. The way the Queen of Heart’s face would tinge red like twin flowers in her cheeks right before she howled with rage. She tried to hold the image, but it slipped away as quickly as the rope slid through the pulley contraption.

Why? Why were her memories stolen; what could she have known that was so important. Or so dangerous… *She wants what you have forgotten. She wants your dream.*

“How do you know me?” she would have thought he hadn’t heard her when he didn’t reply right away, but she felt him tense.

“The queen is here to cut off your heads,” Moss greeted them cheerfully at the first level.

“She is far too attached to that problem-solving method,” Alice said, relieved to step off the lift. Moss giggled.

“It is rather effective,” Hatter shrugged, patting himself down in search of tea which was currently in the same place as her memorandum. His mouth was curled into a smile, and he shot Alice a secretive look she had no idea how to interpret—whether he was thinking about her question or about the queen cutting people’s heads off.

None of the Little Folk occupied the topmost ring of the tree, and Alice watched them move like ants or mice far below and was unable to decide

whether they frantically ran about normally or if the queen had threatened their heads as well.

“Were you able to find the looking-glass?” she meant to ask what had happened to them when she’d passed out, but her mind was caught on the thought of her reflection. And she doubted either of them would give her a serious answer anyways; too much Madness gleamed in Moss’s heartless black eyes.

“This way!” Moss bolted along the path circling the giant trees perimeter. A shout rose from below and she didn’t need to glance down to know they had been spotted. She took off after the little boy with Hatter next to her.

Moss was surprisingly quick for his short legs, and they reached the far side of the ring in minutes without taking the suspended catwalks. He skid to a halt—tripping over his feet and somersaulting into the curtain of vines draped over the wall. Pale luminous flowers leaned their heads away and puffed clouds of red pollen at him. Alice imagined she heard the plant's soft voices trilling in disgust.

I really am losing my mind. The magic or Madness practically drenched the whole atmosphere and grasped eagerly at the emptiness in her mind. A red mist lurking in the shadows of the plants infesting everything.

“I never thought of Wonderland as a normal place, but I’m becoming increasingly suspicious of how easily she keeps finding us,” Hatter was at the railing again; the flickering light of firefly lanterns danced across his face and made it hard for her to see what expression was there. His voice was edged with something like anticipation.

Alice hesitated, uncertain as to why, then joined him to peer two levels down; a line of card soldiers marched steadily upward, crisscrossing walkways that brought them ever closer to the top. It wasn’t difficult to pick out Queen Delaney; her dark raven hair gleamed in the green mushroom glow, and the violent red of her dress stood out like blood against the natural tones of the Little Folk’s tree village.

“What do you want?” she whispered and the Queen of Hearts lifted her head as though she heard the question. Why give her back her heart? Why take it in the first place if what she really wanted was something in her memory?

The queen’s mouth formed words and, despite being still a level below, she was not too far for Alice to hear the shout; her name. She was frozen by

the look of rage in the woman's face; one she had seen plenty of times. Too many times till it was painfully familiar and she realized was not really anger. The anger only masked something more fragile inside of it, and Alice felt she knew the feeling. The fear and desperation, only she had no idea why.

"Seen a ghost?" Hatter teased. He leaned so close over her shoulder that his breath tickled her ear, voice laced with that secretive laughter always gleaming in his gaze. "She is quite the mirror."

Alice snapped out of her daze and spun on him. "Shut up, Hatter!"

She was about to add more, demand he tell her what he knew, when her gaze caught on Moss snoring soundly on the ground and covered in red dust.

"Not you too!" she pushed around Hatter and dropped to her knees. "Wake up, Moss. Why do you choose the worst times to switch?!"

The sound of the soldiers' feet could be heard; the vibration of their march felt through the floor. Moss yawned loudly and batted blearily at her hands shaking his shoulders. Hatter bent and grabbed the boy under his arms, nodding to Alice to get his legs, and they lifted him between them. The thought did not cross her mind to leave him for the queen, and she was glad Hatter felt the same, despite the fact she had just been yelling at him.

"You didn't get very far," Kasei's eyes burned above Hatter's shoulder. The rest of him nothing more than a smoky impression.

"How did—never mind. Which way should we go?" she struggled to adjust her hold of Moss. Her conversation with the feline had already begun to fade, and the realization made her heart beat frantically.

"That depends," Kasei grinned, a look to rival Moss on his Maddest days. "Where do you want to get to?"

"I don't care!" she shouted. The card soldiers were directly opposite them on the topmost ring, charging for the nearest bridge.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

"Out of here, Kasei!"

"Who are you talking to?" Hatter was staring at her, offended, as if he were the only one allowed to act crazy. She imagined Moss had a pass for crazy behavior too.

Alice opened her mouth to reply, then stopped. Kasei smiled at her with a knowing look, and she realized he was not visible to anyone but her. Heat burned unexpectedly behind her eyes and she scowled at the cat.

“You stupid cat,” she muttered, then to Hatter. “Forget it, start moving.”

Hatter raised his eyebrows indignantly, but obeyed, maneuvering awkwardly backward as quickly as possible. Which wasn’t nearly fast enough for her liking.

“Turn left,” Kasei said.

“Turn left!” Alice repeated, then added instantly when Hatter went for the railing edge. “Other left!”

They ducked through a curtain of leaves and came upon a stairwell. Or what she had assumed was a stairwell but turned out to be a smooth, stairless tunnel with a slight declining slope.

“Oh.” Hatter said, then slipped. His fall pulled Moss down and Alice pitched backward in a desperate attempt to not lose her footing, but they all three ended up on their butts and sliding further from the entrance. They picked up speed as the tunnel grew steeper and curved around and around; she grasped at the walls, but her hands found nothing to stop their rapid descent. Patterns were carved into the ceiling; moons and trees and tea cups, mushrooms and birds and jars with the word ‘marmalade’ written on them. Rose vines twined between everything, and she could smell the earth scent of the flowers as they rushed ever downward.

The tunnel ended several feet above the ground. Alice was glad that Hatter had been first to fall as she and Moss landed on top of him in a heap; he was less than pleased. Tall moon mushrooms surrounded them, and the noise of the market had been brought to a frenzied pitch by the queen and her soldiers. The Little Folk careened back and forth like birds roused from their nests by a hawk, and none paid them mind but to push and shove them out of the way. She and Hatter hefted Moss again and made for any direction that looked like it might lead out of the village.

Kasei appeared above the door of a shop stuck into the thick walls of the tree trunk. Warm yellow light spilled from the front windows and silhouetted a display of hats and buttons and ribbons. Alice pointed it out to Hatter, and they stumbled inside. The bell above the door rang out a sharp tune at their intrusion.

The store was claustrophobic; narrow walls were stacked with shelves of hats upon hats of every imaginable variety: top hats and bowler hats and bonnets with trailing ribbons in rainbow hues. Disembodied mannequin heads crowded the set of tables arranged down the middle of the shop, a few had hats, but a majority were simply covered in buttons—sewn or

glued onto them like snake scales. The air smelled of cinnamon and earth, and sickly sweet molasses. It reminded Alice of the first time she had met Hatter in the dungeon of the Hunting Lodge. The faint recollection nudged at a different meeting she couldn't properly bring to the front of her mind, but her gaze skipped to Hatter with a certainty that it had to do with him.

"Now what?" he had paused by a particularly colorful top hat—deep purple velvet with a scarlet ribbon circling the base. A note was tucked into the band with numbers written on it which she guessed was the price.

"Now what?" she demanded of the air, searching for Kasei lurking in the dark corners of the shop.

"I just asked that," he put the hat on and peered at himself in a small oval mirror. Alice realized she still held Moss by the legs, the rest of him sprawled on the floor, and she dropped him none too gently and began to search the shop more thoroughly. A slow panic grew inside of her, waiting to burst into something unwieldy the longer it took for her to locate a way out.

"Help me look then!" she hated the desperation in her voice because her thoughts were scattered and she didn't know why it was so important not to let the queen find them. Only that she needed to run. Needed to escape so she could take a moment to think without everything being so loud.

"Sorry, Alice, no more running," Kasei appeared directly in front of her and disappeared the next instant. She whirled around and faced the Queen of Hearts. He had led her right to them, just as he had at the cottage in the Woods and the River where she'd lost her journal. Alice remembered the feeling of being watched, a presence always lurking, but she had thought it was just the Madness. Perhaps he was the Madness.

The woman stood in the shop doorway; her hands braced on either side of the cracked frame. Dirt and twigs clung to the hem of her red dress, and her once neat updo was fly away strands of black hair. Alice stared into her dark eyes and knew that she was not a mirror, a true reflection of herself, but she was like a window that looked out instead of in. She didn't need her memorandum to know that they were sisters. Alice knew by the way she always felt familiar with the queen's moods and expressions and wanted to change them to something good.

"Leave," it was almost worse that the queen's first words were not a shout. It felt like they should have been. Because Alice could hear the slight tremble in her voice.

“What?”

“You,” she said, pointing a slender finger at Alice’s heart, “are going to fix what you and Minerva tried to do to us. Go find her and get your memory back.”

The panic which had momentarily subsided to her shock rushed up her lungs again and into her throat. A stubborn protest to the queen’s words.

“I didn’t—”

“How do you know you didn’t?!” Delaney demanded.

The words crashed to a halt on her tongue and Alice’s mind opened up inside her head like a void. She didn’t know anything; fragments and dreams and half remembered scents meant nothing. The Madness, the king’s missing heart, the dry expanse of the Desolation, and Kasei’s warning about her stolen past. A new kind of dread crept into her heart, different to the uncertainty of stopping the Madness or who she could trust. It was the fear of learning she had done something, very, very wrong.

Card soldiers pushed through the crowd of Little Folk outside the front windows and stopped behind their queen. Moss snored loud enough to shake the table he’d settled himself under, and Hatter leaned against a shelf of lacey bonnets, gaze jumping back and forth between Alice and Queen Delaney. He still wore the top hat, and his slouched posture seemed too relaxed, waiting. They were trapped, and even if they weren’t, carrying Moss would slow them down too much to make an effective escape.

“You always were the clever one,” Delaney smirked; her lovely features unpleasant with derision. “And now here you are with no answers.”

“She doesn’t look like she wants the answers,” Hatter noted. He had a sad tilt to his mouth, so foreign to his usually teasing smile, and Alice felt sick to her stomach.

“Get out,” the queen said again. She thought her tone sounded softer, less harsh, but it could have easily been the anchorless swirl of her thoughts imagining the slight kindness.

She hesitated, gaze going from Moss to Hatter to the card soldiers, despite it all unwilling to leave them with the queen.

“They will be reassurance of your return,” Delaney said, reading Alice’s uncertainty correctly.

“I don’t know where to find the Blue Caterpillar,” Alice argued, knowing deep down it was a lie.

“Yes, you do,” the queen said with such conviction that the stubbornness left Alice. “Enter the Marshes, and she will find you.”

Kasei appeared around Delaney’s rigid shoulders though she paid him no mind, invisible as he was to all but Alice. He indicated a side door she felt sure hadn’t been there before, and a sly smile showed sharp teeth. She didn’t think it possible to loathe a creature more.

She shoved through a wall of ribbons and strips of lace and out the narrow door, tripping over waist high ferns on the other side. The forest floor stretched into darkness beyond the rectangle glow of the shop behind her; the tall pillars of trees looming shadows.

“Follow the White Rabbit, Alice,” it was Hatter’s voice close to her shoulder though she knew Delaney would not have let him follow.

“Everyone knows not to follow White Rabbits,” she whispered, sounding less sure than he did.

The door shut with a bang and Alice was alone.

9

WHO ARE YOU?

The Mushroom Marshes were the northernmost region of Wonderland, and yet warm, muggy air enveloped Alice as she stepped through the barrier of cattails and tall grasses onto a soft, uncertain path. She did not know where she was going, or why her mind flitted from one thought to the next, but nothing eased the anxiety gnawing at her heart. If she continued to walk, one foot in front of the other, she would find it; find whatever it was she really searched for. Once or twice, she slowed to a stop and wondered why she needed to keep moving forward, but never for long as the nameless echo inside her mind, the ache in her chest, propelled her on again.

Tall spindly trees jutted out of the patches of stagnant marsh waters; scraggly grasses and silent birds swayed in the almost breeze. The path curved haphazardly with no rhyme or reason to its direction but drew her still closer and closer to a gathering of trees at the center of the Marsh. Four petaled flowers nodded their pale green heads at her passing; heavy with drowsy warmth that she felt stalking her footsteps and swirling around her ankles in a white fog. Her dream created shapes in the mist; flowers and hearts and crowns and a girl running from darkness. She tried to kick them away, but they followed her blatantly and refused to be shooed. Fragments of memory. A teasing riddle she was meant to already know the answer to.

She caught herself searching the haze for Hatter’s narrow frame or Moss’s dirty white hair. Their absence only increased the chill in her bones and in her heart, which had not been hers again till recently. Had the queen changed it somehow before giving it back to Alice? Who had she been

before and would she be the same girl she was now? She had tried not to consider the idea, but it was unavoidable the closer she drew to getting her memory back.

Who was Alice, and who was the girl that waited in her stolen memory?

“Lost…lost…lost,” whispers floated around her as she entered the crooked trees, crawling over a fallen log. Her skirt snagged in a splintered piece of dark wood, and a blue strip of fabric tore off.

“I’m not lost,” she hissed at the bodiless voices. They sounded like a chorus of children.

“Lost…lost…lost,” they insisted.

Alice navigated a sludgy patch in the middle of the path and ducked under a wide spider web that glittered with condensation. She would have said the whole place looked dead, but things were growing; brown and grey and ghostly green trees, cattails, and moss. But it was a decaying growth that sucked the color and life from the wet air.

The first mushrooms she saw were dull and the size of clovers. The further in she walked the larger they became, and the trees dwindled out and she was surrounded by a forest of mushrooms. Fog rose from the ground and covered the sky above, which cast the space below the varied mushroom caps into a grey half-light that forced her to tread carefully lest she land a booted foot into a mud puddle. The whispers continued to trail her and moan; words she couldn’t make out but sent shivers of warning across her shoulders and the back of her neck.

Finally, a brighter glow appeared in the deep mist ahead. Delaney had claimed the Blue Caterpillar would find Alice, which she found to be less than comforting based on the derision in the woman’s tone when she said it. She hesitated, and watched the light remain unmoving and almost beckoning her forward. It was the same shade of pure white as the flowers in her dream.

Alice unrooted her feet and stepped closer to the light, shoving aside the large fronds of an oversized fern. Thick smoke rolled into her, breaking around her body like water, and she stumbled to a halt in the center of a ring of giant oak sized mushrooms. The dark stalks were wide as she was tall; the caps a second sky above her head with pale white gills that winked and glowed with fireflies crawling inside them. The movement of the insects made the mushrooms appear as though they were breathing; inhale…

exhale…warm smoke that bent into patterns and shapes that tickled her memory.

“Who are you?” at first, she thought it was one of the whispers deciding to make sense. But the voice was too distinct—low and feminine and lethargic. The whole ring of mushrooms smelled strongly of earthy spices and molasses, bringing to mind Hatter’s tea, and she felt lightheaded.

“Where are you?” Alice asked instead of answering. It was difficult to discern the fake shapes created by fog from the real ones created by forest undergrowth.

“Step closer,” the woman sighed, sounding preoccupied if not bored.

Alice hesitated again then moved further under the breathing canopy. The fog thinned, and she was able to perceive a mushroom that sat a little shorter than the rest, wedged between two lichen covered boulders. A woman lounged atop the red and white cap; her lower body hidden by the mist appeared to have no legs at all. A glimmering glass vase emanated the white light Alice had seen and red smoke rings slipped passed the woman’s lips.

“You are the Blue Caterpillar?” Alice stared at the woman’s pale hands, at the long hair that could have been made of lichen.

The woman drew in a deep breath from the pipe attached to the vase and exhaled, shapes formed in the smoke that should have been impossible: flowers and birds and a creature with gaping jaw and too many teeth. They whirled around her head with a life of their own before fading into the constant fog.

“Who are you?” she inquired again, eyes half closed and head tilted up.

“I’m…” Alice meant to say her name but the word stuck in her throat.

Who is Alice? Hatter’s voice slipped into her mind, and she knew with certainty that he had already known the answer. What was a person if not the choices they made, the choices made by those around them? But she wasn’t sure who the girl in her memory would be or what kind of choices she made; if she would still be the Alice she knew or if she would become someone else entirely. Who was the Alice that knew where the king’s heart was, who hid secrets the queen wanted? The void in her mind ached to be full again, and for the first time Alice acknowledged that she was afraid of remembering.

Who are you?

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “Wonderland is being pulled apart by Madness. I am being pulled apart…I…I must return the king’s heart.”

Her floundering thoughts grabbed onto the one task she could remember, and she tried to push aside the panicked beating of her heart.

The Blue Caterpillar peered down at her curiously, a response poised on her lips, but she choked on the red smoke instead.

“Alice…?” her voice changed tone, shock the most evident over a different sound which nudged at Alice’s lost memory. An almost comforting feeling laced with anger.

“Give me back—” she cut off; her mind clogged with sickly sweet smoke. It was like the Woods again before Hatter had given her the iron ringed headband.

The Blue Caterpillar tossed aside the pipe and leaned forward, batting away the fog that clouded around her legs. She scrambled gracelessly from the mushroom, falling to her knees on the spongy moss ground and righting herself with the support of one of the boulders. Dirt and bits of plant stuck to the gold cotton of her leggings, and she staggered to a stop only two paces from Alice. She realized with some surprise that she hadn’t expected her to be able to walk at all—not that she could think why.

Up close Alice could see a clarity in the woman’s eyes that was at odds with the strong scent she associated with Hatter’s tea. *It clears the mind,* he had said, and she wondered if perhaps he hadn’t been teasing. There was a clear *knowing* in the depths of the Blue Caterpillar’s grey eyes.

“She gave it back?” it was not really a question, just words to put voice to the woman’s surprise. Frown lines edged her mouth; the space between her brows was creased in confusion, and the area around her angled cheekbones and narrow nose were familiar in the way Delaney’s eyes were familiar. Alice had seen hints of them in the looking glass.

“I don’t remember,” Alice glared at the woman—at the other sister she didn’t know she had.

“Of course you don’t,” the Blue Caterpillar lifted a hand to Alice’s cheek, her fingers warmer than she expected, and her face was filled with sympathy. “I am sorry.”

The heat in her belly didn’t want an apology. Anger rushed up to her lungs and into her eyes and down her face, wet and salt tasting, before she could properly think. But her heart knew, it knew a terrible wrong had

happened, not only to Wonderland, but to herself and she was the only one who could fix it.

“You took the king’s heart,” she snapped. “You stole *my memory*! I don’t want an apology. I want to put things right before Wonderland destroys itself.”

The words tumbled from her mouth in a rush, and she struggled to hold onto them. It didn’t matter who the Blue Caterpillar was, only that she was the one with the answers. Hatter and Moss were prisoners, and she had no intention of abandoning them to whatever fate would come if she ran away. They were more real to her than the sisters she supposedly had from a forgotten life. It was better than the terrible untogetherness slowly pulling her apart inside and letting the Madness take her mind.

“Give it back,” she demanded.

“Are you sure?”

Alice did not reply, merely glared at the woman, and tried not to let the gentleness in her tone wheedle its way into her heart.

The woman stepped back and withdrew a box from the pocket of her blue tunic. She spoke as she sorted through a ring of keys around her neck. “She sent you here on purpose, to take what you remember.”

Alice remained silent, afraid that if she said anything her mind would slip away again and she would forget everything like she did with her dreams.

A crimson velvet cushion was situated inside the box with two small, square cakes iced white and blue resting atop it. The words “EAT ME” were written in pink on top of both. The Blue Caterpillar hesitated and looked for a moment like she might change her mind and refuse to return Alice’s memory. Time felt like it was moving too fast and yet at the pace of a snail in molasses.

“I did try, Alice,” she said.

“I have to see for myself,” Alice replied.

Without a word the Blue Caterpillar, her sister, offered the box to Alice and she took a cake with no deliberation. Sugar burst over her tongue at the first bite, sweet enough to make her teeth ache and overpower any other flavor the treat might have had. The mist surrounding them flared to life; colors swirled in dizzying spirals and the whole world leaned to one side, taking Alice with it. She didn’t feel herself hit the ground, but a voice that

must have been the Blue Caterpillar whispered into the kaleidoscope of light:

“You always were the clever one, Alice. But I don’t think you can fix this one.”

White roses were Alice’s favorite flower. Out of all the growing things that surrounded their home the flowers were the only plants tended with love and not desperation, and she was sure that made them more beautiful than the rest.

She followed the wild flowers deeper into the forest than she was meant to, chasing the glimpse of white just up ahead and away from the sound of her sisters’ argument.

The full white roses overran the undergrowth of the forest clearing, growing over tree roots, and twining around the spindly arms of wild blackberry bushes heavy with fruit despite the late season. Some managed to perch upon the mossy stones of the old well, but most contented themselves with carpeting the soft earth floor. Their scent permeated the air and tickled her nose with sweet pollen.

Alice watched pale petals flutter into the well’s darkness, mesmerized by the lazy motion. The Well had been built so long ago no one believed it existed anymore; the forest itself seemed undecided whether to simply swallow it up. It stood much taller than the well in town with seven rows of round stones stacked atop each other. She was only a little girl and so balanced herself on tip toes, wedged into the cracks between stones to see inside. It was a precarious perch but that came secondary to her curiosity.

She had found it.

“Are you at the bottom?” she wondered aloud. The sound of her question was consumed by the stone and endless black. No one answered.

She turned, bracing a hand on a beam of wood attached to the rim of the Well that held up its peaked roof. Her sisters were nowhere to be seen, though she didn’t think she had walked that far from their normal foraging ground. A pout puckered her lips, and she contemplated going to find them, but she doubted they were in the mood for her fanciful ideas and incessant questions.

Minerva had told her a story once, heard from the Wandering Folk, that a sad and lonely boy had fallen down the Well while chasing a white rabbit.

The white roses had grown from the trapped child's tears, washed pure from crying and calling out not to be abandoned.

Alice plucked another handful of petals and tossed them after the others.

"Don't worry," she said, affecting the measured calm tone of her eldest sister. "If you really are down there then at least three people haven't forgotten you."

Perhaps Delaney had already forgotten the story, but Alice decided not to mention that.

"It was very stupid to get stuck in the Well, if you are down there. Everyone knows not to chase white rabbits," she bit her lip in consideration, the rest of the story teasing her memory.

"Do you really have magic tears?" her voice didn't rise above a whisper. "Can you really grant wishes?"

She thought of their sparse garden, and the cold air that crawled into the cottage through cracks in the windows and doors they were unable to fix. The sound of her sisters' heated argument carried on the breeze, though she couldn't make out what they were saying. Perhaps the other children would want to play with her if her dress didn't have so many mismatched patches holding it together.

A sweet scent drifted up from the darkness. It reminded her of winter cookies and tilled earth on the cusp of spring, and she leaned closer, almost believing she saw something move or heard a whisper just below the rustle of fall leaves and birdsong. Her hands slipped; first one, then the other, and she was falling head first into the Well.

"I IMAGINE YOU HATE US," the Blue Caterpillar's low voice slid past the fog in Alice's mind. She could feel her own body laying down on something smooth and soft, but *she* was not in her body—floating paralyzed above herself before she forced her eyes open and snapped back into consciousness.

The Blue Caterpillar, Minerva, sat on the other side of the red and white mushroom cap and stared unseeing at the slender pipe in her hands.

A part of her did hate both her sisters; they had never been honest with her about their life and the struggles they faced after their parents died. Alice had been too young to really remember her parents, and Minerva tried to shield her from any hurt. But she was not blind to the hurt her sisters

were suffering to keep them all alive. The endless cold nights in winter, the endless fights, the days spent foraging in the woods for their food when no one in the village would sell to them.

She tried to speak, but her voice was thick like honey in her mouth, sticking all the words on her tongue. The dread that had been dogging her since Delaney returned her heart manifested into a sickening truth. It was all her fault. The corrupted Woods that was too dangerous to traverse. The unlivable Desolation. The Madness inside of Moss.

Alice had cursed Wonderland in order to save her family. And it had not worked.

Minerva smiled, sadness and regret etched in the lines that formed around her eyes.

“Great Well, I hated using that awful magic on you,” her sister continued. “But I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t let Delaney keep destroying herself.”

“I know...” she couldn’t get the rest of the sentence out, her mind felt too full now; the past she had searched for so determinedly, filled with a sense of grand purpose to save everyone, had not returned softly like the pages in a book turning from one stage of her life to the next. But like a weight dropped on her body all at once that she’d not realized was so heavy. Stealing the king’s heart had been her idea, not Delaney or Minerva’s. But it had gone wrong like her other bargain, and to stop even more damage Minerva had stolen Alice’s memory because Alice was the one who knew where it was hidden. There were several things Alice knew that made both her sister’s nervous and jealous in turn, and that was why Delaney had taken her heart: to control her in hopes of discovering a far more dangerous secret. It was what she had been after all this time.

“I know it’s too much to hope for forgiveness,” Minerva said, unaware of Alice’s frantic thoughts. “But we need to stop Delaney. I’ve been researching the Madness while you were…uhm…under her spell. And it is only getting worse. Something under Wonderland has been rising to the surface for the last five years, since the Jabberwocky, and corrupting the land. If my discoveries are correct, it will start affecting the people too.”

Moss’s glassy black eyes rose to mind; the glint of insanity always teetering at the edge of his smile. She remembered the tension that lurked in the royal court like a shadow—how the nobles would dissolve into chaos at the slightest provocation. Delaney’s burning anger that was morphing into a

worse beast than a mere short temper. She could see it in Minerva too, though her grey eyes were keen, there was a frailness to her body—wasting away slowly but unnoticed.

“It’s already affecting the people,” she replied, more to herself than Minerva. She wasn’t sure she felt very forgiving after remembering the hurt they’d caused, but she had not given them much choice. They did not know the whole truth. Not even when she and Minerva had tried to stop Delaney from killing the previous King and Queen of Hearts, Alice had been too afraid to admit all of what she’d done. Determined to fix it herself.

“What could she possibly want from this?” Minerva wrung her hands around the pipe, still not looking at Alice. “Destroying Wonderland won’t make her happy.”

She said the last part with some measure of disappointment; a long-held annoyance that could only have been the result of endless arguments and misunderstanding between siblings. Alice felt a flash of anger at her eldest sister. Why could they not just get along? None of them were suffering alone. They had always had each other; their bond the only thing that kept them alive and safe, but it was fraying and worn and Alice was desperate enough to do anything to mend it. Or, she had been before remembering.

Who is Alice?

“It’s not her fault,” Alice croaked; voice still uncertain. “She just doesn’t want to lose everything.”

“She lost us, Alice,” Minerva finally met her gaze and looked on the verge of saying more but merely sighed and fixed her eyes on the shifting fog. She was always ending arguments by going silent, and Alice was no longer surprised that Delaney yelled so much when she was angry.

“You know where the king’s heart is?” Minerva said after a silence long enough to blur the edges off their exchange.

A worrying realization rushed up on the heels of her sister’s statement.

“No…?” Minerva’s attention snapped back to her. “I…I can’t quite remember what happened the moments before you took my memory. I thought you had it but…someone else was there.”

Panic crouched ready to pounce. Her memory was corrupted. She’d been exposed to the Madness for too long and it had altered her mind somehow. The dream no longer felt like a dream, but she was unable to recall the face of the person in it. The memory had not come back.

Minerva leaned closer and gripped her arm. “I found you right inside the forest; that was supposed to be our meeting place. You said something about hiding the heart before Delaney arrived and I knew we’d never get away so I…” she trailed off, embarrassed.

“Someone else was there,” Alice said again, dread coiled in her stomach. “I gave the heart to...”

Horror unfurled across her sister’s face. “Who?!”

Alice did not want to answer the question because it would only raise more questions she couldn’t quite understand. It all felt irrelevant; the king’s heart would not save anything, least of all Wonderland. It would not stop the Madness or mend the chasm that grew between the two people in her past life she was meant to trust the most. It was too late for returning the heart to make a difference because it was only one of the mistakes she had made, and not the one which started the Madness in the first place.

Only returning to the Well could answer that particular riddle, and Alice could not remember everything that happened when she fell into it. She would not.

“I have to go,” she staggered to her feet, unsteady on the sloped surface of the mushroom cap. The thoughts swirled in her head and made her feel dizzy like she’d just drunk a full cup of Hatter’s tea, but she was unable to sit still any longer with her sister trying to wheedle information out of her.

Minerva struggled to stand up as well, less certain on her feet. “You can’t go back! Delaney wants what you remember, and we can’t let her get it.”

“She doesn’t even know what she really wants!” Alice barely kept her footing climbing down one of the boulders. “Neither do you! You don’t really know what’s going on.”

A patch of lichen moved under her, and she slipped the last few steps to the muggy earth. Mud soaked into her stockings where her knees hit the ground. She found herself searching for Moss or even Hatter; something to ground her mind again or perhaps let it fly away from the stark reality of her restored memory. The familiarity of their presence was safer to her than all the sanity of Wonderland.

Minerva followed her to the ground and caught her before she could march off.

“Alice, wait. It’s too dangerous.”

Alice pulled away. She scanned the fog for the way she'd entered the clearing. It all looked the same; dark trunked mushrooms the size of trees and spindly underbrush outlined in mist, fireflies and butterflies flitted in and out of sight.

"I have to get Moss," her voice trembled and a single tear flickered off her eyelashes. She glanced back at her sister. Minerva's lips pursed into a thin line and worry creased her brow. For a long time it had been like this; Alice ran off after whatever struck her curiosity and Minerva watched and worried but never followed. She did not ask who or what Moss was, or why it was more important than what she had just remembered.

"You aren't telling me something," her sister said after a pause. Alice's heart beat like a rabbit in her chest.

"It's too late," she said instead of answering the unspoken question. She didn't know whether it was fear of them learning the truth and stealing it or fear of them learning the truth and abandoning her.

Too late, too late, too late! Her mind screamed. *It is all your fault and now everyone will pay. The Well will have its due.*

"This way," Minerva breathed a sigh and began to walk, adding when Alice did not follow. "You won't find the way out on your own. The Marsh let's people in but seldom brings them out again."

Alice did not want to go with her sister. There were many things she did not want but seemed unable to avoid, and so she trailed after Minerva through the winding, grasping fog and out of the Mushroom Marshes.

10

BEWARE, MY SON

Inky tendrils of smoke scented the air with burnt wood and charred fabric; the singed leaves of green plants too young to catch fire properly. The market at the floor of the Little Folk's tree village was lit by the scattered chunks of the large moon mushrooms, which had once stood tall at the heart of the circle, and pockets of orange fire. The green and orange glow oozed sickly light on the overturned stalls and smashed pots and baskets and food strewn all over. Bridges creaked in the still air above their heads and rained down flecks of ash and glittering dust that sparked brightly when it touched anything and disappeared in a flash.

Nothing living moved around the smokey space save for Alice and her sister.

"Moss?! Hatter?!" Alice's gaze searched the chaos for the little boy's familiar dusty white pigtails or Hatter's patchwork jacket, but she found not even the bodies of the Little Folk. It was as if they had vanished. Magic scented the air; a thin mist that prickled her skin.

"Something is not right…" Minerva paused by ruined stalks of the moon mushrooms and placed her hand on the pale surface. "Look at this, Alice."

Alice carelessly stepped on a crushed pile of bread rolls in her haste and came to stand beside her sister. The soft flesh of the mushroom stalk was lacerated with deep marks that did not look to be accidental.

"This is not good. I thought we would have more time."

“Always too late,” Alice craned her neck, trying to find the hat shop and listening with only half an ear. Finding Moss and Hatter was more important than the decimated village; she could not let Delaney keep them.

“Why am I not surprised that you knew this would happen,” Delaney’s voice was like the sudden shattering of glass and drew the attention of both her sisters. The Queen of Hearts did not look very regal; her scarlet dress of silk and lace was torn, tatters hanging off her shoulders and the hem dirty from dragging on the ground. Her raven hair was a dark, tangled cloud around her head stuck with grey ash that smudged her face as well. But even if all the finery was perfect and proper, Alice would never see anything other than her sister in the queen’s dark eyes, and she no longer felt afraid of her.

“I’ve been watching the Madness since the Jabberwocky,” Minerva said, patience in her tone that Alice knew would only make Delaney bristle. “It has only been getting stronger and if we don’t stop it—”

“Underland will take over everything,” Alice interrupted, stumbling over the debris to stand in front of Delaney. She ignored the quizzical look Minerva shot at her and instead demanded: “What did you do to Moss?”

Delaney glowered. “How should I know?”

“Because you were holding him prisoner,” Alice felt her own impatience growing into annoyance.

Minerva rested a cool hand on Alice’s shoulder, stepping up beside her. It was less of a reassuring gesture as it was a means to steady her balance. Alice glanced at her eldest sister’s legs, and at the scars she knew were there even though they were hidden by the loose-fitting trousers. Another result of Alice’s careless wishes.

“What do you mean by Underland?”

“That is where the Madness is coming from,” she tried to explain, but she didn’t fully understand either. It was the magic and Madness, the earthy scent of summer in the middle of autumn, the too large plants that burst with unnatural colors and the flicker of lights in a dark forest. Underland was the pitch-black depths of Moss’s eyes and the sly curl of Kasei’s grin. The invisible madness that permeated the nobles at the Hunting Lodge and chased Alice across Wonderland. No one was conscious of its slow but inevitable effects, like a frog in a pot of water set to boil.

It was the consequence of broken promises.

Both her sisters frowned at her; one uncertain and the other almost leering.

“She is right,” Minerva finally said, slowly and Alice did not miss the suspicion behind her words. “There is a source to the Madness; I just wasn’t able to find it.”

“Both of you are insufferable,” Delaney hissed, yet there was a petulant tone to her voice that sounded less wicked and more complaining. “Why should I help after what you two did to me?”

“What *we* did? You were going too far, Lani,” Minerva said.

“You betrayed me!” she shouted. “You betrayed *us*!”

Minerva pursed her lips and the red in Delaney’s cheeks darkened. Alice shoved away from them both, heat burned behind her eyes, and she thought perhaps it would have been better to never remember. Then her heart wouldn’t hurt so much with longing to see them happy again and knowing the only way to stop the Madness might not end that way.

“Stop it!” she cried, moving away further when Minerva tried to take a step toward her. “Why do you always have to say such horrible things? Just stop it!”

A door in the wall behind Delaney creaked open with the jingle of silver bells and Moss staggered out, flashes of colorful hats in the shop behind him. Alice almost didn’t recognize him past the blur of tears and the loud pounding of her heart.

“Moss!” she dashed across the debris strewn market, tripping over the broken spokes of a cart wheel and coming to a graceless halt on her knees in front of the little boy. He did not resist the embrace she threw around him, her face buried against his shoulder, and the cloying scent of molasses and magic filled her lungs.

“Alice…” he sounded tired and his body shook with a wide yawn. She leaned back to better look at his round face. A sleepy grin stretched his mouth, front teeth poking out like a rabbit or a mouse. “You found her without me.”

His eyes beneath the mop of ash smudged hair were black as a midnight sky; specks of light swirled in their depths like constellations—purple and blue and red. She had never seen that before.

“I wouldn’t have gotten this far without you,” she smiled. The sight of him calmed the frayed edges of her mind; his familiarness easing her frantic pulse. She didn’t think she was the same girl as the one in her memory. She

had traveled through a Wonderland that was damaged and wanted to heal it. But she also was the same, because she wanted nothing more than to help those she cared about most. Somehow, the two separate parts of her had to exist within herself. Before Alice and after Alice warred inside her mind, and she wanted to run as far away as possible from both because they knew what the right thing was to do.

The Madness scraped at the fringes of her thoughts, beckoning from the scrape of memory it refused to return to her.

“Do you know where Hatter is?” she peered behind him, but saw no sign of the man in question beyond the cluttered windows of the hat shop.

Moss mumbled a reply around another yawn and slumped against her, his weight forcing her to sit down on the dirt covered ground.

“This is not a very good time to be mousy, Moss. We need to find Hatter and get out of here.”

He giggled and settled comfortably in her lap—snores almost too obnoxious to be believable.

“Who is this?” Minerva’s curiosity was edged with suspicion still. She stared down at Moss, and the fluttering hem of her tunic brushed against Alice’s shoulder. Delaney stood a few feet back but had followed close enough to be part of the conversation. Her frown looked like the brewing of storm clouds and her arms were crossed over her chest.

“Moss March. He is my friend,” she didn’t turn to look at her sister but gently pinched Moss’s arm trying to wake him.

Delaney ignored the little boy.

“What do you plan on doing when you get the king’s heart back? Continue with whatever scheme you and Min devised to cast me out?” bitterness drowned Delaney’s words and crashed a wave of guilt over Alice. Minerva’s face remained serene as ever, and Alice marveled at how practiced she was at hiding her emotions. It was her way of dealing with pain, while Delaney released hers in angry shouts.

“We were never going to cast you out,” she said despite herself, unable to bear Minerva’s silence. “You were hurting people—”

“What did they do to deserve our sympathy? They hurt us without a second thought!” the pitch of her voice cracked, and the sickly light of the dying moon mushrooms glistened in the tears clinging to her dark lashes. A faint red fog drifted around her legs.

“You hurt *us*, Lani.” Minerva said, hands clenched into fists at her sides.

It was as if she'd rammed a knife through Delaney's heart. Her mouth dropped open, but no sound came out. The air felt tight in Alice's lungs, shoulders tense and each unnatural breath of wind that snaked through the hollow caused her hair to flicker around her face and neck, and her fingers clutched Moss's vest, but still felt empty. Uncertain and helpless.

It's going to happen again. A voice hissed.

Alice clambered to her feet with some effort while trying not to tip Moss on his head. Her mind raced, and her eyes jumped around in search of the way she and Minerva had entered the village, looking for an escape. She needed space; she needed to think and sort through the chaos of her thoughts, and, most of all, she needed to find Hatter. Delaney's words wedged a crack in the part of her memory the Madness had corroded, and she knew only he would be able to do something about it.

It was more difficult to haul Moss's sleeping form without help, but she lifted him in a bear hug and staggered in the direction she was sure was a way out. Minerva said something, but she didn't hear it. Delaney may have spoken too, yet all Alice could hear was a buzz in the thick air. A hum that slithered under her skin and whispered across her face like the touch of warm breath. Lights darted in the corner of her vision, and she knew it was the Madness—the magic of Underland permeating the very air and bursting up from the forest undergrowth.

She was standing outside of the Little Folks' village with no recollection of finding the door and leaving. Her heart was a scared creature, and she knew she shouldn't be surprised to find Kasei's mischievous grin appear in the low branches of a nearby tree. Moss felt unusually heavy in her arms.

"Alice," the feline spoke softly, slyly teasing. It was a different kind of teasing to what Hatter would do.

"Alice…" Minerva sounded distant, pleading.

"You're too late, Alice," Marigold's skittish tone was right next to her, but the girl it belonged to was nowhere to be seen.

"You can't run this time," she wasn't sure who said it: one of her sisters, Hatter, herself.

Pain flared in her hand. Heat arched up the length of her arm from her palm and looking down revealed Moss's teeth latched onto the hand she had rested on his head to keep him from tipping over. She didn't remember setting him down but that seemed the least of her worries.

She yanked her hand free, and scrambled back from the little boy who was looking less like a boy by the second. His white hair had come undone and fell across his face in thick curls, crimson burned in the backs of his depthless eyes, and his rabbit tooth smile stretched into something grotesque and corrupted.

“Moss?!” Horror froze her feet to the ground. *No, no, no! Please don’t take him.*

“Alice?” the boy growled around too large teeth and his body hunched over. It was happening again. Just like it had with the Jabberwocky, only it was Moss. Her Moss and not someone she didn’t know. There was a flicker of understanding in his face, because of course he would know what was going on. He was heartless, not without his mind.

The Madness of Underland broke free of its barrier.

Hands grabbed her arms and hauled her back as the thing that had been Moss swung a clawed arm at her, colliding with a tree and sending shards of bark scattering into the rapidly expanding ferns. She felt sick, stomach lurching up her throat, but there was nothing to throw up and the fingers that dug into her skin continued to pull at her, forcing her to move her feet or risk tripping.

“Come on, Alice, move!” Delaney shouted. Minerva ran on Alice’s other side and together they dragged her between them.

Alice craned her neck and the creature that was no longer Moss let out a howl.

Bad Bargains have bad consequences. The old Wanderers words grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

Riddles are People. The king said in her mind.

You have very familiar eyes. She could almost believe Hatter had spoken the words right over her shoulder, his secretive amusement teasing her thoughts.

The sound of laughter followed her as they raced through the Woods, and she didn’t know whether her sisters heard it too, or if the Madness was spreading within her; a conduit to the world above. It echoed off the massive tree trunks that towered high beyond their heads, everything seemed to stretch up, up, up as if she were shrinking instead of the forest around her growing and writhing with magic. Vines snagged at her feet and dragonflies dived at her face in streaks of purple or blue light. Strange faces peered at her with large luminous eyes or sharp toothed grins that urged her

on faster, faster, faster. And still, over the pounding of her feet and pounding of her heart, there was the steady thud of pursuit behind her.

She was running alone.

“Alice!” the sound slammed into her and knocked her to the ground. They tumbled through the verdant yellow underbrush and scared a pair of creatures that perhaps had been birds but resembled winged rabbits instead. She blinked away the sparks from her vision and struggled free of the person, shoving them off and quickly getting back up.

It was Kasei, larger than he had been before the Madness but still feline and glowing in the magic filled foliage.

“Stop running,” he stretched into the air, floating to be level with her face. She noticed his claws, the points of his teeth, and the intelligence in his cobalt eyes.

“You stop!” she snapped, fear adding a sharpness to her voice. There was no sign of her sisters. “Who are you? What do you want from me?!”

There was no Kasei in her restored memory, at least not properly. He lurked in her mind like a dream from as far back as she could remember, but even still, he was not the person at the Well.

“The answer, Alice. We want what you promised.”

She stared at him. The air dripped with the scent of magic and molasses so thick it coated her lungs with each breath. The dread that had built a wall in her chest, that had curled itself around her mind, splintered like glass and fell away, leaving in its place a clarity that felt light and jagged at the same time.

“You cannot out run this bargain,” Kasei purred, mouth pulled into a languid smile.

“I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Words have power, and you used yours carelessly. A hundred years of magic will have its way.”

He began to look less substantial, his fur misting into beads of light that winked out at an alarming pace.

“Wait!” she tried to grab him but her hand passed through his body.

“Find the Well, Alice. Make good on your promise.”

The Woods rushed back into sharp focus the moment his feline grin vanished completely. Between the ever-rising trunks, she could see the sun—light pouring down from a washed-out sky onto broken brown earth. The Desolation, and the edge of the Woods.

Minerva rushed forward and caught her as she stumbled into the daylight.

“Great Well, Alice what happened?” her eldest sister slid her arm around Alice’s waist and let Delaney usher them both further from the dark line of trees. “You disappeared!”

Kasei’s command settled fully onto Alice like a cloak; a jacket of patchwork and a hat studded with iron rings.

“I need to find Hatter,” her voice came out ragged, and she had to repeat herself to the blank stare of her sister.

“What in Wonderland does *he* have to do with all this?” Delaney demanded. “I’ve never met a more useless man in my life.”

Alice decided not to mention the King of Hearts. Her gaze was pulled toward the center of the Desolation. Her reply distracted as she imagined there was a flicker of green in the hazy horizon that direction.

“Because he has the king’s heart,” She said and earned twin looks of surprise. He had more than just that, but she couldn’t bring herself to tell them that. Utter confusion clouded Minerva’s face. Alice had never told either sister about Hatter, not properly anyways. Some secrets were too complicated to explain and some she simply did not want to tell because then it wouldn’t be hers. It would be theirs, and he was not the kind of secret one shared without great risk. What they knew already—about the wishes, about the hearts—was dangerous enough. They didn’t know the price that came with it all.

“But how?” Minerva finally said at the same time Delaney exploded.

“He had it this whole time?!”

Alice pushed out of the circle of Minerva’s arms and took two steps away from the Woods. She avoided looking at it; what if Moss watched her from its depths. Tears threatened to cloud her vision but she shook them away.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “It’s all my fault, all of this.”

She waved her hand in a wide arc to encompass the Desolation and the Woods.

“I tried so, so hard to make things better. To fix whatever curse made our lives so horrible, what made you both so unhappy. But it all became so complicated, and I thought I was clever enough and…”

The words choked in her throat. It was too late, like Marigold was always saying, and she didn’t know what would happen when she found

Hatter and took back the heart. Because that would not fix the Well. She needed help, yet the request was clamped in her chest no matter how hard she tried to force the words out. Her mind screamed to just ask while at the same time it bombarded her with the memories of all the times she had asked for help before and her sisters had not heard.

She had to be good enough on her own. She had to be the one to pull them from their thick despair. She could do it right this time.

Warmth circled her body and she was pulled fully against her sister, arms trapped in front of her, and squeezing the breath from her lungs in a startled huff. She opened her eyes to a face full of black, wood tangled hair. Delaney did not let go when Minerva stepped up behind Alice and wrapped her arms around them both.

“I’m sorry…” Alice forced the words out past the painful lump in her throat. Delaney squeezed her tighter.

“Don’t be stupid, Alice. You aren’t the only one who messed up.”

Minerva leaned her head against Alice’s, and she felt her nodding in agreement.

“We don’t have time to regret the past,” her eldest sister said. “Right now, we need to save the future. We need to save that little boy of yours and stop the Madness.”

“It’s too late,” Alice lifted her gaze to the Woods just over Delaney’s shoulder. The dim shadows shifted and moved among the tree trunks, toeing at the edge of the Desolation. She saw eyes watching them and thought one pair looked familiar.

“It’s only too late if we don’t try,” Delaney’s words were laced with conviction. Minerva was quiet for a long second, and Alice felt a prickle of apprehension at the silence and braced for her to say something that started an argument but instead she said:

“Where will we find this ‘Hatter’ man?”

Alice drew in a deep breath, full of dry air and the scent of magic, then let it out in a sigh.

“He will be waiting for me at the Well,” she answered.

11

THE THIRD BARGAIN

The path to the old Well was overgrown, but Alice followed the rabbit trail by heart. A part of her was connected to the place, drawn to the unfinished bargain, and she needed nothing but her unconscious memory to find it. Briar bushes snagged at the hem of her dress, and the air was heavy with the unnatural summer heat that was devouring Wonderland's cool autumn. Underland was a perpetual growing, living place that never felt the touch of cold to dampen its magic. Curious insects flitted between the sunlight that fell in dappled columns through the thick rustle of leaves above her head; butterflies with translucent yellow wings and legs that trailed below them like black spindly streamers, others reflected light like glass or mirrors, and Alice blinked to clear her vision of the flashes. Tiny gnats buzzed and whispered entreating requests into her ears while the thick, green vines of creeping ivy caressed her arms if she moved too close or was forced to shove aside the foliage to stay true to the path.

"How much further?" Minerva's voice, though quiet, disturbed a furred creature and sent it darting across their feet. Alice didn't get a good look at it, but she thought perhaps it was a rabbit. Not that she had ever seen a rabbit that large. Or wearing clothes. Delaney yelped and sent a number of unpleasant words after it. Laughter echoed in response.

The clearing opened before them as if summoned by the question, and Alice stumbled to a halt. Her breath caught in her lungs as a wave of familiarity and nostalgia cut through her whole body and left a tingling

sensation in her fingers. Uncertainty lurked at the edges of her resolve, and it tasted like fear in her mouth.

The Well was nothing grand to look at; weathered grey stones, more moss than rock, haphazardly piled atop each other or slouched in heaps barely recognizable as having a purpose. Alice was surprised to see the roof that had once stood over the Well had almost completely rotted away into the earth; it leaned against the stone wall barely visible underneath the grasping claws of ivy and more briars. It was the change which startled her; the glen had so long been the same in her mind, in her dream, that the reality of it was meant to be timeless in the same way.

Yet the flowers were unchanged. They covered everything; hundreds of pure white petals unfurled to the size of her hand, and clung to every crevasse, vine, spare patch of earth they could get their crimson stems wrapped around and deep roots sunk into. Tree trunks and their branches above dripped with flowers like clumps of pollen frozen midfall. The ground was a carpet that filled the air with a startling clear floral scent, spiced with the distinct molasses smell of magic.

“Where is he?” Delaney whispered; it felt unsafe to speak too loudly. The glen was empty. Minerva rested a hand between Alice’s shoulders, and the tension eased from her body at the gentle touch. Her mind refused to ease.

She picked her way down the slight slope into the clearing, testing each step before placing her weight fully on her feet, and her sisters followed just as cautiously. Slowly she made her way to stand next to the Well. It wasn’t nearly as tall as she remembered from all those years ago as a child. Then, the Well had been made for giants; for kings and queens and the strange magic of the Wandering Folk’s stories. She stared down into its dark depths without needing to climb up on the slick stones.

Alice absently stripped the petals off one of the downy white roses curled up near her feet, and one by one she dropped them into the Well; the petals spun like snowflakes and disappeared into the black.

“Do you remember that old Wanderer’s story you told us, Min, the winter they camped outside of town?” she did not turn to look at her sister but could sense her move to stand closer.

“The one about the boy in the Well… who ate only treacle…” Minerva trailed off, recalling what exactly the story had been about, and Alice

flickered a glance to see the realization smooth the furrow between her brow.

“He granted wishes. You know, stories feel very real when you’re a child, but it’s not often you actually find what you’re looking for,” Alice mused. Air gusted up from the depths of the Well, scented like deep earth and sticky sweetness. It caressed her cheeks and loosened the hair she’d tucked behind her ears. Almost welcoming, as if it recognized her.

“What are you looking for, Alice?” his voice sent shivers across her skin, like the touch of insect feet over her arms and neck. She tried to speak, but her mouth was suddenly dry, and she had to swallow hard to unstick the words from her throat. Delaney stiffened next to her but was thankfully too startled by his sudden appearance to speak right away.

“You,” Alice whispered and for a moment continued to stare down into the Well; shadows swirled and beckoned her to travel back in time. Back to a day in the same clearing but with an Alice she didn’t think she was anymore.

Hatter laughed, and the familiarity of the sound sunk into her like teeth and made her heartbeat quicken as it had the very first time she’d heard it. She finally looked up, and his grin widened almost too much to fit his narrow, skull-like face. It reminded her of Moss’s mouth stretching to leer at her with too many sharp teeth as the Madness took up space where his heart should have been.

“You have found me,” he said, “if a little too late.”

Minerva moved, shifting her weight to touch her shoulder to Alice’s, and she startled—her sisters’ presence nearly forgotten. The firm press of her against Alice settled the frantic spiral of her thoughts—the terrible image of Moss in the Woods, of the way the king had sounded so hollow without his heart, and the click-click of Marigold's pocket watch as she muttered nervously. Minerva did not know what she had to do, and neither did Delaney, not really. Alice had been unable to find the right words to explain the bargain, but their support felt like it had taken a century to arrive and was worth the wait.

“Do you remember the first time we met?” she asked him, ignoring the curious glance he pointed at her sisters. The unsettling glimmer of his mismatched eyes was heightened with a new kind of clarity. A full understanding. She knew the feeling and knew also that he remembered things that perhaps made him less amiable toward her. Alice was not the

only one to have her mind messed with. Having one heart was confusing enough, but a person could go mad if a second heart was suddenly forced upon you.

“We had quite the little chat; about family problems, about tears and wishes and hearts.”

“You told me there was no understanding a person’s heart, not even our own,” she wanted to say what she really came for, but after days of traveling with him and Moss she had learned never to approach a subject directly—not if she wanted to get proper answers.

“And your reply was that I just hadn’t tried hard enough,” he cackled, nearly toppling his hat into the Well. It was the one he had picked up in the Little Folk’s shop. “You are quite the philosopher.”

She bent to pluck more white petals but did not toss them into the Well, rubbing them between her fingers and watching him closely.

“She wasn’t wrong,” Delaney snapped, her voice sounded too petulant for the situation and reminded Alice, again, that she was not alone. The unsettling realization that the Madness was purposefully making her forget tightened in her chest, and she wanted to poke her sister and make her be quiet.

“She wasn’t right either, my dear,” he countered. “Sometimes trying harder only breaks things.”

A summer wind seeped from the eroded stones of the Well, snaking around Alice’s ankles. It clutched at her like living breath, and whispers rose from the foliage touched by its warmth. It ruffled the hem of Hatter’s patchwork jacket and tousled his hair, briefly lifting it away from his eyes. The silent amusement she had gotten used to seeing in him was still there but changed, like everything else around her had changed since getting back her memory. Marigold was right; nothing was ever as it seemed, especially people. He was not the boy from the Well she first met; he was not the man who had come with her across Wonderland in search of herself and the king’s heart. Both those people were mixed in his eyes just as all of who she had been was a swirling gust of uncertainty inside herself.

Who are you?

She could see the same questions flicker briefly behind his mismatched gaze but she had no way of knowing the kind of existence he had lived before she even found him. What that might shape him into.

“I guess it is hard to truly understand a heart,” her voice was quiet, and she did not only mean her own, or Hatters. Delaney, Minerva…Moss and Marigold even. The villagers who used to treat them badly because they didn’t have parents. The Wandering Folk who had been outcast for their tainted blood that gave them hints of magic feared by Wonderlanders.

Heat pooled behind her eyes, but she couldn’t let the tears fall, not yet. His maniacal expression softened for a moment; a glimmer of something like uncertainty, or longing, in his gaze. But it was gone too quickly for her to catch it.

“Perhaps that’s why people like to give them away all the time, or keep them hidden,” he didn’t say it as a question, but it stirred her mind like he had. “Humans are often afraid of what they cannot fully understand.”

The petals were crushed in her palm, releasing their sweet scent into the air. Minerva slipped her hand into Alice’s, but she didn’t notice, focused solely on Hatter.

“I am here to make a bargain,” she said.

“How about a riddle?” he grinned. She bit back an annoyed response, one she would have not hesitated to give voice to a few days ago, and straightened her posture.

“If you have it, you want to share it. If you share it, you no longer have it,” she said immediately.

“A secret,” he replied just as quickly. “Sometimes I’m white, but always wrong. I can break a heart and hurt the strong, build love and tear it down.”

“A lie.” Alice hesitated, his riddle unsettling her more than she wanted to show.

He leaned forward against the Well, resting his palms on the moss-covered stone rim. That teasing glint in his eyes.

“Why is a raven like a—” he interrupted before she could finish.

“What is it you seek, dropping petals and pennies down the Well?”

Alice hesitated; his sudden directness a spark of warning through her veins. They had only spoken two riddles. She was meant to ask a third. That was how the last two bargains had worked.

She had asked for the same thing two times before; three tears, enough to fill a wishing vial. The clearing felt thick and heady around them, as if it waited for her words with magic ready to erupt forth from deep within the earth. From Underland. She would do it right this time.

“Three wishes.”

His shoulders lowered slightly, and he pushed off the Well with a twisted expression. “Still trying harder?”

Annoyance curled in her stomach, and she had half a mind to march around the Well and pinch him for being so difficult. But he pulled a rose from where it grew around one of the stones—his fingers careful to hold the thorns away from cutting him. A slight smile hovered around his mouth as if he could read her thoughts and thought it would be highly amusing if she did.

“And in return?” he asked.

When she was a little girl, Delaney had sold the only two chickens they owned to a passing Wanderer in exchange for a whole bag of bean seeds. It was meant to be a good season for planting and the beans would grow fast and plenty, a decent trade. Only after the trade did she realize they were magic beans, even then bits of magic slipped up into Wonderland, but they were useless and uneatable. It had not been the first terrible fight between her older sisters, but it was the first time Alice realized that neither of them was really angry at each other; they were afraid and desperate. She went in search of the Wishing Well the very next day.

There was nothing she would not have done to save her sisters, nothing. But she hadn’t truly understood the consequences of being too clever with her words and not clever with the heart. Because she had not really been willing to do *anything*.

“Balance,” she said. “I will honor my word and return to the Well.”

“That will not do,” he shrugged, a mad sort of glee on his face. “That was our old bargain, one you already need to fix. You must offer something else for this one.”

For a moment his words simply floated in the air around her head, disturbing a few of the roses that hung twined around tree branches like dangling willow leaves. Her mind was blank; she had not realized he could refuse. Vague desperation skittered inside her chest as she tried to come up with an answer. What more could she offer than herself? The Madness was her fault; she had brought Hatter out of the Well and opened the way for Underland to seep back into Wonderland. She had let the corruption start to twist the forest and twist the hearts of her sisters. Alice had let the magic into Wonderland that had taken Moss’s heart and turned him into a monster.

“Offer something else?” she choked out.

“Yes.” Hatter answered. “Just you won’t do anymore. Like I said; it’s too late.”

Too late, too late, too late. The flowers seemed to echo, their whispers seething with heartless amusement. Marigold’s nervous voice and the whispers in the Marshes all chorused in the back of her mind.

“Oh,” she breathed.

The words were a cruel thorn shoved into her stomach, but a frown cut his face as though he had been forced to give her ash in her tea when what he really wanted to do was give her sugar. The rapid switch of his expressions, his mood swinging from Mad to Man, made Alice feel sick; the way he snapped from a creature of Underland to the familiar companion who teased her and offered her help, who taught Moss annoying little songs and was always there to help carry him whenever he decided to be mousy. She could not grasp hold of him anymore, even though she was compelled to keep trying; he was all together something else than he had been, and yet he was the same as always.

A warm hand slid into hers, brushing the crushed petals from her palm and closing firmly around her flower-scented fingers.

“Then it won’t be just her bargain,” Delaney’s sharp tone challenged him to argue. Minerva had hold of Alice’s other hand, she always had, and her quiet resolve enveloped her sisters with comfort and determination.

You are Alice. Their touch said. *You are our little sister.*

Hatter looked insufferably intrigued and spoke before Alice could protest.

“What kind of bargain do the three of you offer instead of the one?”

Alice did not miss the emphasis he put on *three*, as if he meant something very important by it but wanted her to guess. Of course, he wouldn’t just tell her; he was Hatter, after all, even with the magic well and truly back in his blood. Perhaps more so because of it.

Minerva caught the implication as well and reached behind Alice to pinch Delaney who was in the middle of drawing breath to say something impulsive.

“Three requests,” she said in her low voice, confident and familiar with the ways of magic, which Alice supposed made sense. Moss had told her the Blue Caterpillar collected secrets. Alice had found the sound of her older sister soothing when she was little and the memory eased the tension in her shoulders somewhat and cleared her mind. But she still wasn’t sure

she'd appreciate what Minerva chose to bargain in place of Delaney. It was hard to trust them after so long doing it herself, and the air felt like it could snap at the slightest hint of disunity between them.

"We ask for the three wishes—"

"And the king's heart," Alice interrupted. She doubted it was the cleverest way to use her request, considering all the Madness she had let into Wonderland, all the mistakes she remembered, and all the people she had hurt because she did not see anything beyond the glittering wishes. But it was possible to use a wish for Moss instead of using one to get the king's heart back if she asked for it. She could not imagine leaving him as a monster, slaying him like the king had done to the Jabberwocky.

"Alice's freedom," Delaney finished and the whole glen went silent.

Alice drew in a sharp gasp, and Minerva pinched *her* arm to stop the words from gushing out. She was reminded unsettlingly of when Hatter would pinch Moss to wake him, only she was not asleep. The dream had come to consume her reality.

"What do you offer in exchange?" Hatter asked again. An eagerness sparked around his whole body; anticipation, hunger… Madness that infected all it touched. "Each of you must give something."

Minerva looked distressed; her mouth pressed into a thin line and grey eyes narrowed. Alice knew it was because Alice and Delaney had messed up whatever carefully crafted idea she'd meticulously thought out. Perhaps she had planned to take Alice's place in the Well, holding back Underland.

A voice keened from somewhere outside the clearing. What Mad creature had Underland vomited up in the Woods? What cunning beings prowled the people of Wonderland with dangerous bargains and corrupted wishes? Where was Moss?

"Three drops of blood," Minerva's voice trembled slightly; the barest hint of uncertainty masked behind it.

Alice tried to catch hold of her frantic thoughts; she wouldn't let Delaney sacrifice herself.

Hatter held out the rose in his hand, over the gaping black mouth of the Well, and Minerva reached to grasp its thorns. Blood dripped from her closed fist and disappeared into the darkness.

Alice held her breath, transfixed. Yet the magic held its breath with her and waited.

“Alice…” Minerva nudged her and broke free the knot forming in her throat; the cloying scent of molasses and the fluttering white petals all around them. For a terrifying moment she thought perhaps it was all another dream come to haunt her and tease her with a secret just out of reach only to jolt her awake into a life of forgetfulness and silly worries. A part of her hoped it was true.

Her fingers curled around the stem of Hatter’s rose. The thorns pressed little points of pain into her palm, and the soft mossy stones of the Well pressed into her stomach as she leaned over them. Hatter watched her with that curious, knowing gleam in his gaze, and he smiled at her.

“Don’t take her, please,” she whispered. “Even if you take me in exchange for the king’s heart, it will still fill the Well, I will be enough for the magic to leave.”

“Always finding a clever way around,” he answered, quietly enough that she had to lean further over the Well to catch his words. “Only the bargain won’t work like that; the requests have already been set and you just undermined it all.”

He leaned also till they were not very far apart at all, and she saw, for the briefest moment, an echo of the boy she had wanted to rescue. Who he had been when she first met him in the Well, who the Wandering Folks stories said he was; a sad, lonely little boy trying desperately not to be forgotten by a world that didn’t even notice he’d disappeared. Three tears dropped free of her eyes and slid down her face. A gust of magic filled air threw her hair up over her head and Hatter’s top hat off.

“Don’t waste these too,” he grinned, brushing a finger across her cheek to catch the tears before they could fall into the Well. That ridiculous look that meant he was about to do something she’d berate him for lit his face, and then, he grabbed her wrist and pulled.

12

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Alice had been falling for what felt like ages. The air moved past her slowly like it didn't really want to let her through, but, since it was air and not a solid object, was obliged to no matter its feelings. Her hair wafted around her head in blonde tendrils and the skirt of her dress expanded around her hips like the bowl of a tea cup. It was not as dark as she remembered; a dim blue glow followed her slow descent and illuminated the grey stone walls of the Well, hung with lichen and ghostly rose petals that had stuck to them on their way down to grant wishes.

The circle opening of the Well had vanished almost instantly after Hatter tossed her into it, and she had been too startled to cry out till it was too late and her shouts would not make a difference.

"I hope all your tea is bitter for the rest of your life," she shouted, sensing that perhaps Hatter could still hear her. "You are stupid and insufferable!"

Maybe he couldn't hear her. Quiet swathed her as softly as the slow-moving air; a contrast to the incessant whispers of the rose clearing she hadn't noticed till the sound was gone. She imagined she should feel tricked by him, feelings of hatred and loathing riled up, but it was not Hatter who caused the riot of despair and anger to claw at her heart. He had done what was in his nature, what the Madness demanded of him. He had done what she'd asked.

Alice flailed her arms and legs helplessly in frustration. She was angry at herself. All this time and she still had not been able to do it right; she

tried and tried and yet always failed to help anyone. Failed to catch the smallest mistake or loophole that sent the whole bargain crashing down in a burning mess. Like the right answer was a secret that slipped her mind even with it fully restored.

Her sisters' presence had not made a difference. The bargain had crashed apart and now they would not get the king's heart or wishes.

"You really are no good at this, Alice," she said aloud, hugging her arms around her stomach.

"It comes from Thinking Too Much," Kasei's smooth voice drifted out of the shadows below her. Or above her. She was standing on solid ground—ankle deep in rustling foliage and surrounded by the scent of buried earth and molasses magic and dry stones. Clusters of pale blue and purple moon mushrooms poked between the cracks of the wall; wide flat caps aglow.

"Kasei!" she scanned the narrow space several times before catching sight of the cat's cobalt gaze flickering into existence a little over her head. Just out of reach. The anger twisted in her stomach, but it was mixed with dread at the sight of him.

"Hello, Alice," his fanged smile glowed white in the dark. He was a disembodied face that was not entirely symmetrical, and she wished he would materialize the rest of his body and stop his eyes from wobbling about like two loose marbles.

"What are you doing here? Why did you push me to remember all this time if you were only going to turn me over to the Madness? What will happen to my sisters? Or Moss and Hatter?" the questions tumbled out of her in a rush she couldn't stop, with everything she remembered racing through her mind and coming up with all the worst ideas. She tried to reach and catch hold of him.

"So many questions," he chuckled, gliding aways from her snatching fingers. "Which do you really mean I wonder?"

All of them. She wanted to snap but caught the words on her tongue before they could escape. The Well was dark above her like a roof that allowed not even the faintest pinprick of light from the above world to pierce so far underground. It should have been smothering, but she could sense the immense space stretching up and up and up and her very small beneath it, alone.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asked.

“What do you suppose you are supposed to do?” There was teasing in his tone and Alice supposed that all creatures of Underland found themselves ridiculously amusing even when they were not. Especially when they were not.

She heaved a sigh, heavy enough to have been a winter blanket, and sank to the oddly soft earth. What she had thought were leaves piled in drifts over the floor were, in fact, rose petals. Dozens of them, hundreds and hundreds of wishes dropped over hundreds of years by people just like her, desperate enough to brave magic. They did not smell like flowers anymore, but the cloying stench of Underland and were cold to the touch, light as feathers. Some were spattered with drops of red or glittered with clear blue teardrops melted into the soft surface, some remained pure white.

“I suppose I will grant wishes to those who come looking for them,” she mused bitterly, frowning at a little bug that crawled from beneath a nearby moon mushroom. Sharp pain flared in her chest saying the words aloud; she imagined fractures splitting her heart. “Like Hatter when he fell down here.”

“It was a bargain made long ago to ensure Wonderland’s freedom,” Kasei purred. The rest of him had decided to show up, and he floated to a perch just above the carpet of wish petals. “One that I am tasked to see fulfilled.”

“A bargain’s a bargain, I know! And a riddle’s a riddle,” her voice broke with a loud sniffle, “and what I will actually do is sit here and cry till I’ve filled up this whole Well and can climb out the top again.”

Tears traced hot tracks down her cheeks, and her hands clutched fistfuls of flowers against her pounding heart. How long had Hatter lived at the bottom of the Well? Had it really been his tears which grew the roses? Calling out not to be forgotten… had there really been no one to cry with him? To mourn the loss of a son or a brother or a friend?

She stared watery eyed upward again and wanted to believe that her sisters were looking down. There would be no return of the king’s heart and no saving Moss from the creature he’d become because their bargain had not worked. The Madness would seep out of Wonderland again, but it would be beyond rescuing. It was what she had promised with the first bargain, yet it was hard not to feel bitterness and self-pity behind the practical voice in her head that said at least she was the one trapped, as she deserved.

“What ever happened to trying harder?” Delaney’s condescending tone cut the thick air like a crack of lightning in a pitch-black sky. Alice jerked her head up, gawking at the sight of her sister standing in the middle of the Well. Her red gown was a sickly, shredded sight in the moon mushroom glow, and her raven hair was a billowy storm cloud around her beautiful face. Beneath the usual scowl Alice could see the streaks of tears in the soot and dirt on her cheeks, and the red lining her dark eyes, which were filled with an expression very unlike what she had seen in a long time. It was something more like when they were younger, and Delaney was less angry. Alice thought it might be love, and her heart screamed to reach out and grasp it.

“What…?” she scrubbed the heel of her hands down her face to clear the mess of tears in her own eyes and stumbled to her feet.

“Minerva has the king’s heart,” her sister interrupted. Several petals had gotten snagged in the ragged hem of her skirts and she tried to shake them free with little success. “A vial of Wishing Tears, too, though I’m not sure what good it will do us now.”

Guilt twisted in Alice’s gut, but she couldn’t bring herself to think of Moss being too far gone to save, or the other creatures too far gone on Madness. Somehow, she still had hope that at least a few of those she cared about would be safe. She trusted her eldest sister to rebuild and put things back into some kind of order with the help of Marigold and the Wandering Folk. But…

“What are you doing here?” dread peered its awful truth back at her question, and she grabbed hold of her sister. “No! Laney, you can’t!”

“Of course, I can. It’s no more than I deserve; for what I’ve done, and what I made you and Min go through.”

Alice shook her arm fiercely, all the despair and hopelessness that had been crushing down on her, the resignation to several lifetimes of imprisonment in the Well, broke to pieces in the wake of a singular, childish desire. To save her sisters, no matter what. It was awful to realize that there had been some relief in finally being forced to honor the very first bargain, kicking and fighting the whole way but inevitably ending where the magic demanded. No longer responsible for the heaviness of all the mistakes she had made and all the ones she hadn’t, all the ones her sisters had made and she felt the need to shoulder for them.

“You didn’t really want to hurt us,” she said, and could hear the pleading in her own voice. “You just wanted to make sure we never had to suffer like before; it’s what Minerva wanted too when she let the villagers mock her for begging. It is what I wanted when I found the Well.”

“Let go, Alice. This is not your fight alone, and I will spend a hundred years in here if it means you don’t have to keep carrying other people’s hurt as your own.”

“But you are my sister! I want to carry your hurt.”

Delaney had no trace of the angry queen in her face; whatever bits of Madness clung to her banished from her dark eyes. She pitched forward and into Alice’s arms, her own locking tight around her younger sister.

“You are my sister, too,” and she didn’t have to say the rest. “Stop being so stubborn and let’s go make Wonderland right; it is what the bargain requires and then I must return here.”

A sob broke past the lump in Alice’s throat and she spun on Kasei.

“Please, there has to be a different way?” the world tilted around her and Kasei’s sly grin was unchanged. Her feet were no longer on the ground though she had not taken a step.

“A bargain’s a bargain,” the cat said, a shrug of his glowing striped shoulders.

She was suddenly much higher, and her flailing refused to draw her back down.

“Laney!” she shouted and hated how she sounded like a little girl again. Petals whispered around her, falling like snow, and she thought she heard a reply, but it was indistinguishable from the hiss of magic.

WARMTH SEEPED into Alice’s hands. A faint glow peered from between her closed fingers and the glass edges were rounded and soft. Fragile. She had not expected to recognize it, to feel a sense of familiarity in holding it. The king’s glass heart.

Both her sisters pulled her to her feet and out of the clearing; thorns snagged at their clothes and sliced thin bladed pain up Alice’s legs. The roses seethed around them, all moving steadily toward the Well, but her focus remained on the heart in her hands. The spark of life at its very center. How had Hatter not known it was inside of him? Two hearts had to have been maddening. He was nowhere to be seen when the Well spat her and Delaney out again.

They raced through the Woods, and she could feel it clawing at her mind, stealing the names of things and twisting paths to go in circles instead of straight. Alice was grateful for Minerva's firm grip on her arm, leading all three of them with determined steps, and her eyes fixed ahead with certainty furrowing her brow. The Underland creatures no longer hid in the shadows but filled the Woods; birds with looking-glass eyes and a mouse that strolled along on its hind legs, a satchel over one small shoulder. Its eyes were heartless black when it turned to stare at them race by. The voices of other animals were distinct in their cries;

"Caucus race!" shrieked a fox with spectacles.

"Callooh! Callay!" answered a lizard much too large to be normal.

"But who has won?" Alice did not see which creature said that but a shiver ran down her spine.

Laughter chased the voices; silvery and high, grumbling and sharp. A dog barked somewhere out of sight, but Alice imagined she heard "Beware!" instead of "bark." She thought of Moss and the strange dog-like creature he had turned into and nearly tripped face first into the thrashing bushes. Bright sunlight pierced the trees with summer heat, and sweat made her dress stick to her body uncomfortably. More flowers lined the path in riotous colors, and little beady eyes blinked at them from their centers, small mouths chiding.

Alice caught a glimpse of dull brown between the ivy choked tree trunks and they half stumbled, half careened to a halt at the edge of the Woods. A stitch had formed in her side and she leaned against Minerva, forcing air into her lungs around the pain. A wind had kicked up, blowing dust in swirling gusts across the Jabberwocky Desolation, and it whipped her hair into her face as she stared out at the rocky terrain.

"There!" Delaney said, pushing out of the shadowed forest without waiting for them to catch their breath.

Alice saw a moment later what she was moving toward; a dark smudge edged closer further up the tree line, and Alice knew it was Marigold and the king even before Minerva told her.

"Come on!" Delaney shouted back at them; her face cut into a severe frown.

"Min?" Alice's voice was small but her eldest sister heard.

"Alice… there is no other way," she said, not unkindly, and sorrow filled her grey eyes with unshed tears. "We have to make this work or we

lose her for nothing."

"I don't want to lose her at all," Alice protested. "None of it is either of your faults. I should be the one going back to the Well."

"But you can't, not if we want to fix Wonderland. That Hatter man said as much and you are not the only one who gets to make that decision."

She thought of a hundred arguments and wanted to throw them all at Minerva with force but Hatter's voice teased her again; *Don't waste your tears…use them wisely.*

How was one supposed to use sorrow wisely? The wishing vial could not get Delaney out of the bargain; Alice had tried that once with a little boy in the Well, and it had started the whole mess in the first place.

"It's not fair," she said lamely. Minerva pursed her lips, but it was not an angry or disappointed expression, she looked lost like Alice felt and her hand worried at the pocket of her flowing tunic where a different kind of light glowed than the one from the king's heart. Wishing tears. An idea nudged at the back of Alice's mind, and a flicker of hope dared blossom in her chest; all she would need was one tear.

A call rose from where Delaney was several yards ahead of them, and Alice held out her hand for Minerva to take. They quickly navigated the uneven ground, avoiding jutting stone, which had once been part of a house, and jagged ends of wooden beams once attached to a fence or a barn, and reached Delaney moments before Marigold arrived with not only the king in tow, but also several nobles Alice recognized from the Hunting Lodge and a bedraggled caravan of the Wandering Folk.

"What on earth are they doing here?" Delaney sounded as condescending as ever, and Marigold fidgeted like she had a whole nest of bees in her shoes. The golden pocket watch clicked incessantly.

"The Woods—I mean the Madness, that is, Underland…It got the lodge," the girl's clothes were rumbled, and her white hair escaped her twin braids in feathery wisps. Even though her eyes were a pale pink color, Alice could still see the resemblance to Moss in their wide shape and the rounded nose, and the slant of her worried eyebrows downward where his would shoot up with gleeful amusement. Guilt clutched a hand around Alice's heart at the sight of Marigold, and she thought it might simply stop beating.

"We can stop it," Minerva spoke up, and stepped forward. Marigold's nervous gaze flickered to her then back to Delaney, uncertain. "Together."

Alice bit her lip to keep the despair from breaking her apart; because she wanted her sisters to be together more than anything, wanted Moss to be his normal silly self again, but it would never be how she remembered. When she was young and oblivious, and they all laughed in the dim light of their cottage on spring evenings with the roses blooming brilliant red. No, they had all changed too much for that, and the bargain could not be broken if any of them were to have a chance of laughing together again.

“Where is the king?” Alice asked, his heart warm in her palms. Marigold looked at her and opened her mouth to answer but instead she asked:

“Moss…?”

The air felt very cold all of a sudden and the expression on Alice’s face must have said more than she was able to with words. Marigold went pale as her hair and pressed a hand to her mouth; the pocket watch slipped from her fingers and was left to dangle from its chain attached inside her vest pocket. A terrible little sound escaped.

Realization broke over the confusion on Minerva’s face as she understood what they were talking about, but Delaney scowled between them.

“It is coming,” the king’s weak voice was only heard in the moment of shocked silence. Alice thought perhaps he had said it several times and they had just not noticed because he was the king of hearts and nobody bothered to notice him. He stood amongst them, slouched and vague with the wind flapping his ruined jacket around. His eyes were no longer a startling, unnatural blue, but pitch-black from corner to corner and filled with glinting Madness. A sword was strapped to his waist and looked out of place and a bit ridiculous.

Alice had the horrifying thought that the Madness would change the king into some grotesque creature, like it had gotten hold of Moss.

“Underland is already here,” Minerva said somewhat baffled, but Alice knew it was a very king thing to state the obvious and provide very little help.

“No…” he said slowly, a crease formed between his dark eyebrows. “The Bandersnatch has awakened.”

His words made no sense, yet ice pooled in Alice’s blood and her hands tightened on the glass heart.

The king's heart. She stared down at it in surprise. How could she have forgotten?

"Laney!" she gasped. Her sister had gone rather quiet when the king appeared, and the look in her eyes when she turned them on Alice was unreadable.

"The heart! We need to give it back to him before it's too late," Minerva said, sounding as surprised as Alice that they had forgotten. Delaney's face paled slightly.

"I know that," she snapped. "Why are you telling me, give it to him."

Alice did not remember what it was like to have her heart returned, the absence of her memory at the time made sure of that, and she wondered if the king would hate them all. If anyone had the right to be truly angry it was him.

The ground shook beneath them; a low rumbling roar rolled across the Desolation in its wake and kicked up even more dirt and small rocks. The nobles retreated from the sound, the fear of whatever creature it heralded outweighed their superstition of the Woods, and a dark form emerged from the unnatural valleys on the Desolation much too close for Alice's liking. The Wandering Folk muttered nervously among themselves. She remembered what the Jabberwocky had looked like emerging from the earth with its serpentine body and leathery tattered wings too small to fly, but long talons that cut through stone like soft butter and a shriek that made her blood run cold, the stench of Underland magic thick around it.

The creature that crawled toward them was just as horrifying, but it was not the Jabberwocky. Grey sunlight slid off the monster's glimmering white fur and pitch-black eyes stared at them from a muzzled head with a leering smile too wide for its face that forced its front teeth to stick out over its bottom lip. It lumbered toward them on all fours, black claws digging furrows into the ground, and a sound came from Marigold that was like the breaking of glass. Alice was sure her own heart was a million splinters in her chest.

Moss.

"Alice!" Minerva was suddenly standing in front of her. "The heart."

She became aware of the nobles all shouting and running; the small deck of card soldiers abandoning their royal charges to dash in the opposite direction. The Wanderers were an uproar of chaos too—the horses rearing

in their harnesses while their drivers tried to keep them from tipping the wagons. A blanket of dark clouds ebbed over the sky.

Too late…

Alice thrust the king's heart into Delaney's hands even as a quiet voice in the back of her mind whispered not to trust her with it. But she snatched the vial of wishing tears from Minerva before her eldest sister could argue and let a single drop fall onto the smooth glass of the heart without stopping to think too much—there was no time for any of that. Delaney stared with wide eyes, a trace of fear in their dark blue depths, and she hesitated.

"Make a wish, Laney," Alice ordered, shoving her toward the rumpled king of hearts. The wind grew stronger, whipping their clothes frantically and Alice tried to wrestle her hair out of her face, but she had no ribbon to secure it. She did not hear what Delaney said, only saw the motion of her lips form the words *I wish…* the little spark within the glass glowed brighter and brighter till Alice was forced to squint against the light. Delaney pressed her hands to the king's chest.

He slumped to the ground, appearing by all accounts unconscious, but his chest rose and fell steadily, and Alice noticed the pulse of a heartbeat at his neck. Delaney knelt to peer at his face with her mouth pursed in a frown that looked vaguely reproving, but not as unkind as Alice remembered.

"That creature is getting closer," Minerva scanned their surroundings as if she hoped to find something other than jagged rocks and caved in homes. The Woods was a brilliant green presence behind them that was not dimmed by the darkening sky.

"We need to stop it!" roared a Wanderer whose voice Alice recognized.

"NO!" Marigold threw herself at Sage and grabbed hold of the woman's arm.

"No!" Alice said at the same time, catching Minerva by the hand instead. "We can't kill it, it's Moss!"

Her sister snapped her gaze back to the monster that had been Moss with horror, fingers pressed to her lips. Sage looked just as shocked.

"The Madness has taken him…" the woman said faintly but with resigned sadness. "He belongs to Underland now."

Alice stared wildly around, searching the crowd of Wonderlanders and Wanderers, between the kicking legs of horses and cries of fear but her eyes did not land on what they sought, she wasn't even sure what she was looking for till a flash of color jerked her attention toward the Wood. But it

was a noble woman from the Diamond family, wearing a silly flouncy coat stripped red and white. It was not Hatter.

He can't help now, she chided, *it would be foolish to ask him anyways; things always turn out complicated.*

"We can't just kill him," she protested. Ideas raced through her mind: injure him, knock him out, trap him somehow, but none of those would lead to reversing the Madness and turning him back into a little boy.

"What would you have me do instead?" the king's voice made both Alice and Minerva jump. It no longer sounded empty and oblivious; a firmness underlined his deep tone in a way she'd never heard before. She turned to gape at him and had to lift her head up to see his face as he was not hunched over, and though his long hair was unkempt around his shoulders, his eyes were filled with clarity and an unnerving calculating look aimed at the approaching creature. At Moss.

Delaney stood a few paces back; face flushed nearly as red as her tattered dress and avoiding eye contact with either of her sisters.

"Whoever he was does not look to remember any fond feelings for you," he added. The sword at his side no longer looked ridiculous with his hand grasped around the hilt.

Marigold was insensible in Sage's arms, and the older woman had a tremendous frown fixed to her mouth, but she did not let the girl go even with all her struggling. The monster was much closer and the ground shook with each footfall; it was not nearly as large as the Jabberwocky had been, but it loomed over them with Madness ablaze in its eyes. For a moment indecision snatched at Alice, and her fingers tightened on the vial in her hands; only two wishes left.

The king's sword slid from its scabbard in one easy motion, and he stepped to face the creature, coming between it and the panicked group of nobles and Wandering Folk. Alice shoved passed her sisters and grabbed hold of his sword hand.

"Wait!" she had to tear her gaze from the creature which was Moss and glared imploringly into the king's clear brown eyes. A single tear tipped from the vial onto the blade, it slipped down the sharp edges and left a trail of glimmering blue on the silvery steel.

"Please, don't kill him," she whispered. His brow furrowed, and she half expected him to refuse—say she had no right to ask him any favors

after stealing his heart and leaving him an empty shell. But instead, he let his gaze flicker to Moss, who crouched and cried out at the sky.

“A wish?” he mused, curiosity in his tone. Alice did not let go of his wrist. His eyes shifted from Moss to Delaney who stood poised to move, but Alice wasn’t sure which direction she meant to go: away or toward them. A look passed between the King and Queen of hearts, and Alice thought that perhaps he did not hold so much resentment as was probably deserved.

He lifted the blade close to his mouth and whispered. She let go and stepped back, not hearing his words. The sword glowed brighter, and its light drew the monster’s attention, reflected in its midnight eyes.

Minerva pulled Alice back as the creature charged, and the king ran to meet it.

13

THREE SISTERS

Bursts of magic and sharp rock whipped through the air, and Alice felt one nick her cheek, the sting forcing her to flinch and take her eyes from the fight between the King of Hearts and the Bandersnatch. The king's sword was rippling blue light infused with the wish, and he moved with the sure confidence Alice remembered from before. Before she'd taken his heart, when he had slayed the Jabberwocky. The monster leapt quickly out of reach, ducking close again in an almost playful way, like it did not even notice the wagons its claws destroyed or the people knocked over in their haste to escape.

"Watch out!" hands grabbed Alice's arms and hauled her back, out of the path of a horse broken loose of its harness and driven wild by the Mad creature wreaking havoc.

Shouts broke out from the edge of the Woods.

She turned to stare. The trees surged; vines and bushes flashed in brilliant, unnatural colors of pink and blue and purple, and strange animals laughed and jeered at the nobles and Wanderers as they struggled to free themselves. She thought she saw several of the Wandering Folk grow tails or wings stretch from their backs as Underland's magic got inside of them.

"I need to go," Delaney said, somehow her quiet words heard over the rumble of the fight and the frightened screams. None of them had reentered the Woods again, huddled close by a wagon. Minerva reached to take her hand and Alice felt the heat of her last wish in the vial. It burned to be used.

“If the Well is filled it will stop the Madness,” she continued, her eyes found Alice as if she could read the thoughts brewing in her mind. “The bargain must be fulfilled.”

It will be, but not by you. Alice was sure that if she used the wish to replace Delaney, the bargain would still be honored and none of their efforts would be ruined. Underland would be banished again back below the earth and Wonderland would…

Magic tore up the ground and, in the distance, she could hear cracking wood; a tree splitting under the constricting weight of living ivy. A flock of birds erupted from the Little Folks’ forest across the Desolation, black against the dark grey swell of clouds. Several nearby caves that had once been homes crumbled in on themselves with the new onslaught of destruction, and she could see the Madness like a red vapor curling around stones and snaking up the Wanderer’s wagons and creeping among the stems of underbrush turning them black and sickly green. It licked at the legs of the people.

Nothing will ever grow here again. Hatter’s voice whispered from her past and doubt nudged at her conscience. But closing the Well would undo it all; the magic would be gone and Wonderland could rebuild.

Nothing! He insisted.

The king hit the wagon the three of them hid next to and rolled to the dirt. Alice clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from yelping, and Minerva caught her around the shoulders as if to pull her away. The monster, Moss, roared a taunting sound that was too much like the high, piercing laughter he made as a little boy when he was feeling very Mad indeed, and Alice would have to keep a close eye on him to ensure he didn’t run into thorn bushes or jump off boulders or swing from giant mushrooms.

“Moss…” she whispered. His head turned toward her and for a hesitant moment he simply stared, head cocked to one side. The king attacked.

His sword flashed past her, and he was next to Moss in an instant. The blade slid across its shoulder, eliciting a surprised yip. No blood came from the wound; a vaporous hiss issued forth instead, but Alice still felt like being sick.

“Laney!” Minerva released her hold of Alice and ran for the Woods. Alice spun away from the battle and scanned the trees for her sister. Her heart hammered in time with her frantic thoughts and nearly drowned out the seed of doubt that whispered her plan would not work.

She spotted a part of the tree line not thrashing with wicked vines, a little rabbit trail she knew would lead straight to the Well. Alice took off after Delaney, and the sound of chaos chased after her.

She spared one glance backward; the king locked in a battle that looked more like a game to the creature who had been Moss, and the Wonderlanders and Wanderers fighting against the creeping Madness.

I…It's all my fault. She turned and forced her way into the Woods.

ALL THE ROSES WERE RED. A bloody, crimson clearing surrounded the old Well, which looked to have been newly repaired. The stones stood tall and orderly, though still moss covered, reminding her of the day she had found it as a little girl. The sun was right at the top of the sky and not a single cloud blocked its light shining down through the trees, dappled shadows danced in the gentle breeze. Only birdsong filled the silence, whistling a familiar tune that sent shivers up her spine, the wind sound whispered through her hair. Anticipation lay heavy and watchful over the glen.

"I thought you might return," Hatter lounged to her right, against a tree at the edge of the clearing. He sounded slightly bored, or like he was trying to hide his curiosity.

"Where is Delaney?" she demanded; her heart pounded in her throat. *Not too late, not too late…!*

"You know something I realized?" he said, ignoring her question in favor of his own. She almost couldn't be annoyed, used to never getting a straight answer.

"Despite all the stories warning against following white rabbits, messing with magic, no one ever said what happens if you manage to catch it."

His musing gaze was fixed on the Well, messy hair concealing most of his face, and she realized that he was purposefully avoiding looking at her. Impatience burned in her chest, and she pushed through the tangle of brambles and stood over him. He didn't bother moving from his slouched position.

"Trouble, that's what comes from catching dangerous magic or have you not noticed."

He grinned and laughed. The sound lashed at the strange tranquility of the glen and all the anger dissolved in her stomach as a tinge of fear nudged her. She wanted to reach down and turn his face to look at her, suddenly

terrified that what she would see would be a creature just as corrupted as Moss. Who was he without the king's heart? What sort of Madness had he become after years and years living in the Well, granting other people's wishes but unable to escape?

What will I become? The memory of the dark, dry warmth at the bottom of the Well sent a chill over her skin.

Hatter stood abruptly, like he had heard her thoughts, and swept a deep bow. "Right you are, dear Alice. Nothing but trouble."

When he straightened and their gaze met, both his eyes glowed a pale lavender. His hair had gone entirely white, the same as the roses, and, like some of the petals she'd found at the bottom of the Well, the tips were crimson. She hoped it was not blood. His mouth quirked up in a smile that did not change the quizzical expression on his face, and she pressed her arms around her stomach. He did not look very different, not quite monstrous, yet. A heartbeat passed and he did not say anything, but his eyes narrowed slightly in a teasing look. Like he knew she wasn't sure what to make of who, or what, he was after it all.

He stepped down into the clearing with a beckoning motion and Alice's feet brought her after him before her thoughts could catch up. Tiny insects hovered in the lazy air, and the heat pressed on her clothes that had been made for cool autumn weather, not the unnatural summer of Underland.

"Where is Delaney?" she asked again, pushing sweaty hair back behind her ears, and sped up to get next to him.

"Why did you chase the White Rabbit in the first place?" he spun to face her, leaning against the moss-covered stones so abruptly she almost knocked him backward right into it. The scent of spiced tea and earthy molasses engulfed the gentler aroma of flowers from the Well and his question, though spoken lightly, hung heavy between them. A sly grin waited at the edges of his lips, anticipatory and unsettling.

"I…" she caught herself from speaking without thinking, the vial clutched in her hand tightly till she was afraid it might shatter. "I wanted to change my life, change all three of our lives to something better."

"Ah, there I suppose is where we differ."

"We differ in a great many ways, Hatter. But that isn't important," Alice held up the wishing tears so the golden sunlight reflected in the many faceted vial. Glittering sparks danced over the clearing, over his shadowed face. He raised an eyebrow.

“Where is Delaney? I’ve asked three times already,” she readied herself for the worst answer.

“Right here, Alice,” Delaney stomped into the clearing behind Hatter. She scowled and came right around the Well to fix the look on Alice. “You are impossible.”

Alice threw her arms around her and a few tears escaped the corner of her eyes. “I thought I was too late.”

“You are, because I’m not letting you take my place,” she grabbed hold of Alice’s shoulders and pushed her back to arm’s length. “Don’t argue.”

“I will argue!” Alice retorted.

“She certainly will,” Hatter sniggered. She ignored him and clutched Delaney by the wrist.

“Please, you deserve better.”

“Not everyone would agree with you, Alice,” Delaney sighed. “And they wouldn’t be wrong.”

She wanted to shout that it wasn’t fair, that people never wanted to see the better side of her sisters. They simply did not understand. The words tumbled through her mind and each time a good sentence arranged itself she could picture her sister neatly picking it apart.

“It will fix everything,” she said stubbornly. Delaney pursed her lips.

“It will only withdraw the Madness,” Hatter added, unhelpful and infuriatingly cavalier. “None of the consequences will disappear.”

He sat forward suddenly, craning to look up into Alice’s face. “Oh! Is that why you want to go so badly? Running away from your problems?”

His laughter dug razor sharp claws into her heart and tore to shreds every ounce of willpower she had left. Every pretense and lie she had been building in her mind the whole run she’d made back to the Well.

No running, Alice… Kasei purred.

“Don’t waste your last wish to sacrifice yourself,” Delaney freed her hands and took a step back. “Save Wonderland, then come back and save me.”

She added the last part with a rueful smile, and her gaze slid sideways to peer into the Well.

“I don’t care about Wonderland,” petulant, Alice glared at Hatter to be quiet. Delaney laughed.

“Now you sound like me. What about Moss and Marigold? They deserve better too, and, as you seem fond of pointing out, it is all your fault

half of Wonderland is an unlivable wasteland. Don't you think it's time we both grew up?"

Heat swept up Alice's cheeks as she remembered the relief she'd felt at the bottom of the Well, no longer truly responsible for rebuilding, for facing the consequences of her botched bargain any longer.

"Don't waste your wishes," Delaney ordered, sounding as bossy as the Queen of Hearts ever had. Alice tried to grab her, but long boney fingers snatched her hands away before she could. Her sister tumbled head over heels into the Well; the tattered red silk and raven black hair the last thing Alice saw of her. Hatter leaned over the darkness and made a tsking noise.

No…no, no, no! A chill wrapped around her heart. Hatter peered into her face; he stood close enough that the tips of his boots pressed against hers, and she could pick out the lighter specks of color in his purple eyes. His hands were no longer warm, and his finger sent a shiver through her whole body as he traced it across her tear-stained cheek.

"She has something I never had, Alice," he let the small droplets slid from his hand into the Well. They flashed blue in the blazing sunlight. "Don't forget."

THE GLEN WAS silent when Minerva appeared at the last of the trees, panting. Alice could sense the sorrow from her; a soft sob breaking behind the hand over her mouth in an attempt to keep it in.

Too late.

Alice watched as the tears that slipped from her chin, spattered dark patterns on the old stone. She brushed her fingers across her cheek, where Hatter's cold touch still lingered, and held her hand over the gaping dark as he had.

"I don't have any rose petals but…" she forced out a shuddering breath. "Tears are the strongest sort of wish."

She didn't know whether the magic heard her, whether Delaney could hear her all the way down the Well, but she whispered aloud anyways.

"You won't be forgotten."

Minerva drew her into an embrace, and for a long moment neither spoke or moved. Alice didn't care whether the Madness had retreated back to Underland, or if the magic was banished. She cared that her sister, who she had just gotten back, was gone. Trapped beneath the earth to fulfill a bargain Alice had messed up to being with.

Don’t waste it. Delaney’s voice whispered in her mind, sounding as peeved as ever.

Alice glanced into the Well one last time then turned to leave the clearing. Minerva looked torn; she had not been able to say a proper goodbye and the tears shone on her face.

“I’ll be back,” Alice promised.

The Woods vanished the moment she stepped past the first threshold of trees. In its place stretched desolate rocky terrain, torn up and destroyed by rampant magic and Madness. She couldn’t help the slight twinge of resentment that Hatter had been right; sealing the Well had not reversed all the damage done. In the close distance she could see the huddled group of Wandering Folk around what remained of their caravan, and suite family nobles crowded among them tending to injuries. They all stared when she approached.

“Alice…?” Marigold stood up from where she’d been kneeling by an overturned wagon.

Her throat tightened when she tried to answer the unfinished question so she asked her own instead.

“Is Moss safe?”

Sadness filled the girl’s eyes, and, for a heart wrenching second, Alice really couldn’t breathe. Marigold stepped aside and motioned to a pile of dusty blankets on the ground which turned out to be her younger brother. Small and boyish again, his mousy white hair fluttered over closed eyes and soft snores rose and fell with his breathing. A brilliant blue scar drew a clean line down one side of his face, but he was alive.

“He won’t wake up,” she said, but there was hope behind the bleakness. Before Alice could consider the vial in her hands, someone else caught her attention and he was watching her closely.

The King of Hearts.

The glimmer had gone from his sword, but he still held it out of its sheath. He did not ask what had happened when she came to stand beside him; his jaw merely tightened and he looked away from her for a long second to regain his composure. She had never realized how much he had cared for her sister; no wishes had been used to form their bond even if things had become complicated afterwards.

“I can fix this,” she said and he glanced at her. It was strange to meet his dark brown eyes when she was so used to the unnatural blue they had been

to cover up his heartlessness.

“How?” he did not sound accusatory or derisive, but genuinely curious. She stepped past him and faced the Desolation.

Only the faintest warmth emanated from the vial. She removed the stopper and lifted it to her lips and whispered.

I wish to heal Wonderland.

Then she tipped the last wishing tear out and let it splash quietly onto the rough ground. A cold wind snaked among the gathering—its bite a promise of winter and the distant forests that had not been destroyed shuddered their leaves loose at last like a great sigh of relief from the whole land.

“I can show you where she is,” Alice held out her hand to the king, the other tucking the vial safely into the pockets of her dress. He frowned down at her, then accepted her hand, and she led them back to the tree line, which was already changing from garish summer green to reds and oranges and yellows of autumn. Together they passed into the Woods and returned to the Well.

Again and again, Alice returned. She would continue for a hundred years if that is what it took to fill the whole thing with wishes and bring her sister back.

EPILOGUE

POOL OF TEARS

The roses were gone.

Dead thorn bushes and brown splotched vines slumped or slouched across the clearing like piles of kindling gathered for burning. The trees remained resolute guardians, but their leaves had fallen in winter sometime between her last visit and this one. A warm wind snaked around her ankles now and rustled the sleepy hollow with the gentle touch of coming spring. It was a slow spring; an earthy, safe arrival that would wake with a stretch and a yawn and then smile sweet wildflowers after a long four months hibernation.

It was a Wonderland spring that filled the clearing of the Wishing Well.

The second thing she noticed was the air smelled like cold earth. The hot, cloying scent of molasses and magic no longer lingered in the gulps of breath she tried to get back after running the near half mile from town to the Well. Fear sunk low and ugly in her stomach.

"Minerva?" she called softly; even the absence of Underland's usual presence could not make her raise her voice when she was here.

A figure rose unsteadily on the opposite side of the Well's ancient crumbling stones; if she had been looking closer, she would have thought the structure even worse for wear than before. But her gaze was transfixed to the person standing next to it. Silver blue droplets glittered like stars in the woman's long silken black hair, pale arms bare and shimmering in the weak early spring sun when she turned to face her sister.

“Alice?” Delaney blinked wide luminous eyes at her and Alice had never heard her sound so uncertain, so full of desperate hope.

The thorns crumbled under Alice’s feet, and she ignored the little burs which caught at the hem of her skirt. Delaney watched her round the Well and without a word lifted her arms to catch her little sister. Tears burned in Alice’s vision and choked her voice. She had grown taller than Delaney, but, in her arms, she felt small again; the little girl she had been so many years ago who knew nothing more than that she loved her sisters and would do anything for them. Anything. Even growing up.

“Please don’t be a dream again,” she finally said. “Please don’t leave.”

Delaney’s arms tightened around her; hot drops of salty tears trickled onto Alice’s shoulder. “I won’t.”

The sound of breaking branches was the only warning either had before another set of arms caught them both in a hug. The familiar scent of flour and yeast and heat wafted around them, and Minerva’s lichen brown hair fell across Alice’s face. For a long moment all she felt was a cocoon of warmth and tears and laughter. Finally, finally, finally, her heart said with each thump, thump, thump against her ribs.

“How?” Minerva leaned back to look at her sister’s face. There was worry in her tone, like Alice, fearing it was only a cruel dream sent from Underland.

Delaney frowned, the downward curve of her lips a familiar sight, but the usual venomous anger was gone. She turned her head and the other two followed her gaze, to the Well and the sunlight which glinted merrily on water that came all the way up to the very brim.

“I think… it was you both,” she said. “I heard you every day when you came and felt your tears and then, they were filling the Well and…”

A smile touched her face and it was as beautiful as Alice remembered. “It let me go.”

For once Minerva did not argue; she did not try to figure out what it meant or how the situation might be a trap or have some kind of hidden meaning. Instead, she laughed and her tears glowed like the Well water next to them.

“Let’s go home,” she said, and they linked hands and left the clearing together.

A whisper touched Alice’s shoulders, the faintest scent of molasses tickled her nose, and without meaning to her gaze slid to the forest and the

man almost hidden between the trees. Watching them.

Delaney tugged on her hand; she'd stopped without realizing it. All three sisters stared into the woods and Alice slipped her hand free, stepping toward him. Minerva and Delaney did not tell her no. Because the faintest, smallest inkling of doubt nestled inside each of them, and Alice refused to let it take root and grow.

"It is complete," the sound of his voice stirred up memories she tried to brush away with the swift motion of tucking her hair behind her ears.

"How do you know?"

"I can feel it," he glanced at the Well, now appearing as nothing more than a pile of old mossy stone with a little rain water or melted ice trapped on it. "The true bargain is fulfilled."

Alice was surprised by the flicker of sadness that blossomed in her chest. "You are trapped here."

"I was trapped there as well," Some of his usual teasing slipped into his voice, and she could see the prelude of a smile light his lavender eyes. "I will not miss it."

"Thank you."

He laughed; it wasn't cruel, but there was an almost unkindness in it. A hint of Madness.

"My dear Alice," he sounded like Hatter again. "A bargain's a bargain and a riddle's a riddle. They have an answer that can be reached in more than one way."

Alice sighed. "That makes very little sense, you know."

He grinned widely. "I have very little sense to make. I believe you took most of it."

He stepped forward suddenly, hand outstretched and, in a flourish, drew something from behind her ear. A porcelain white tea cup shone in his hand, and he held it as an offering to her. She hesitated, remembering belatedly that she should be wary when dealing with him.

"A gift, nothing else. I am allowed one of those every hundred years," he was trying not to laugh adding the last part, and she wasn't sure she believed him. She took the cup and ran a finger along the rippled surface; the glass was warm beneath her touch as though he had been holding it for some time already. When she tipped it slightly the odd design took shape as rose petals, slowly unfurled and whiter than any real flower could ever be. Inside the very center, at the bottom of the cup, were three spots of crimson

paint like little stars or drops of blood. They shimmered with the tell-tale sparkle of magic.

She looked up and Hatter was gone; the scent of his tea blend and the echo of mad laughter were all that lingered. She watched the trees for a long moment; the light that shifted with the moving branches and flutter of birds or scampering creatures on the floor. Normal creatures, safe.

"I won't see you again, will I?" her voice was a whisper, a question not meant to be answered. Because she could feel it too, and was surprised again by the small sadness it brought. Carefully, she tugged the blue ribbon from her hair, strands already coming loose from his little tea cup trick, and fastened it to a tree limb that still held a few leaves on it despite the coming and going of winter.

"A gift."

Alice returned to her sisters—the seed of doubt whisked away and gone. She did not look back as they made their way out of the woods and toward home.

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